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BEYOND CONSUMPTION: THE ART, MERCHANDISE AND GLOBAL IMPACT OF  
TAKASHI MURAKAMI AND A SUPERFLAT GENERATION

Cindy Lisica

THESIS

Presented to the University of the Arts London  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the impact of Superflat theory and practice of the artist and curator, Takashi Murakami. The thesis aims to analyse how contemporary transnational artistic activity functions via the work of Murakami and Superflat artists, including Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano. From the blockbuster group exhibition, *Super Flat*, curated by Murakami, which debuted in the United States in 2001 at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, to the 2007-2009 ©MURAKAMI retrospective traveling from Los Angeles to Brooklyn then Frankfurt to Bilbao, the synthesis of ideas is showing the way to unprecedented directions in contemporary art. This investigation also links Murakami's work to that of American Pop artists Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons and explores how Superflat art functions within and contributes to the already distorted area between parallel structures, such as high and low, fine art and commercial production, or East and West.

When peeling back the layers of Superflat, there is a rich, beautiful and violent history. Recognising the fusion of tradition and technology, my research explores how Superflat artists are achieving international success by engaging in multiple outlets of creative expression and collaboration in the continuing context of globalisation and a consumer-driven art market. Images of anxiety and destruction are disguised as playful and marketable characters, and three-dimensional animation figures become cultural icons. Superflat explores the simulated, sensuous, colourful and obsessive "realities" that we inhabit on a global scale and captures a twenty-first century aesthetic. With reference to the representation of violence and disaster in art and popular culture, contemporary Japan's construction of national identity and the postwar "Americanization" of Japan, this thesis examines how the layering of ideas via cross-cultural exchange produces a new form of hybrid and hyper Pop art.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF THE SUPERFLAT

We want to see the newest things. That is because we want to see the future, even if only momentarily... It is the art at the center of a Japanese culture that lacks prestige, authority, celebration and cost. In it, however, one can see the budding saplings of a new future. (Murakami 2000, 9)

Contemporary artists are now, perhaps more than ever, engaging with mass production and commercial marketing strategies to develop their practices and identities. This thesis will analyse Takashi Murakami's impact on contemporary art production through strategic engagement with the spheres of commercial production and fine art. By connecting the *anime*<sup>1</sup> and *manga*<sup>2</sup> forms in Superflat to Edo techniques, Murakami presents his Superflat concept as a merging of art and commercial culture, while also establishing it as a carefully selected Japanese export to the West and questioning the socially and academically constructed definitions of art. This thesis does not attempt to reconcile the division between art and commodity, however, it will attempt to reveal the contestations and complexities in the way Superflat relates with the conceptual line between traditional binary divisions, and the occasions where the layering of meanings are highlighted.

Superflat is a multi-dimensional concept that forms an art movement, style and theory and represents contemporary artists who are inspired by anime and manga. Superflat art and theory were originally presented in the 2000 group exhibition, *Super Flat*<sup>3</sup>, which Murakami curated. In the exhibition catalogue, Murakami articulates *A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art* and presents Superflat as both a new form of art and a cultural concept and philosophy, borne from original Japanese expressions of anime and manga and inherited from the Edo period (1600-1867). The exhibition launched Murakami's trilogy of exhibitions that appeared

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<sup>1</sup> *Anime* is the term used internationally to refer to Japanese animated cartoons.

<sup>2</sup> *Manga* is the Japanese word used internationally to refer to Japanese comics or printed cartoon drawings (sometimes called *komikku*).

<sup>3</sup> *Super Flat* was condensed to one word, "Superflat", after the exhibition catalogue was published.

in Japan, the United States and Europe. *Coloriage* (2002) was shown at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, and his final installment, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, was named the best thematic museum show in New York for 2004-5 by the American chapter of the International Association of Art Critics.

This thesis considers the art world now to be a multi-faceted and complex network of cultural influences and information that complicates, but does not necessarily erase, the distinction between art and commodity. In a globalised world, contemporary conditions require an expanded examination of the crossovers between "high" and "low" culture, as well as challenges to the concepts of art and its privileged status within cultural production. This thesis seeks to identify Murakami's Superflat concept and the work of contemporary artists looking at anime and manga production as a cultural context that illuminates the tensions between binary divisions.

Murakami's reputation saw a marked increase from the 1990s in 2003 as he gained international attention when the sale of his 1997 sculptural installation work, *Miss Ko2*, reached 567,500 US dollars at a Christies New York auction in May 2003, which set a record price for the sale of Japanese contemporary art. Although today his works frequently reach prices well over the million-dollar mark at auctions, Murakami took this news as an opportunity for self-promotion, announcing the sale price on his website and press materials. In this respect, Murakami exposed himself and his Superflat brand of art to the key debates in contemporary art and culture regarding the relationship between art and consumption. Five years later, at a Sotheby's auction in 2008, Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* shocked the art world (and pleased his dealers) with a purchase price of 15.2 million US dollars, which quintupled his previous record at auction. (Goldstein 2008, n.p.)

Murakami made the cover of Japan's premier contemporary art magazine *Bijutsu Techō*

twice in the same year (2003)<sup>4</sup>, and his *Jellyfish Eyes* painting was featured simultaneously on the covers of *Giant Robot* and *Artnews* in 2001, and at present, Murakami is unquestionably the most popular Japanese artist on the contemporary art scene both in Japan and abroad. Murakami is such a prolific sensation that he was recognised as one of *TIME Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People for 2008, the only visual artist on the list in that year. In the same year, he was also selected as one of *GQ Japan's* "men of the year" and "Best of 2008" in *Artforum*. The list goes on, with Murakami's press credentials extending beyond the art world and into the spheres of fashion, business and popular culture.

In the last decade, Murakami famously collaborated with fashion designer Marc Jacobs for the French brand Louis Vuitton, introduced and developed a biannual art fair based in Tokyo (GEISAI), opened an animation studio in Los Angeles, and has been credited with a new reading of Pop art that defies the traditional binary division between East and West (Howe 2003; Economist 2008; Vogel 2007, 2008). Within the professional art field, Murakami's blockbuster exhibitions have provoked in-depth historical and cultural analyses of his work, Japanese popular culture, and the work of other Japanese contemporary artists in the West. In addition, manga and anime culture, central to the study of Superflat, have become a popular subject for research, particularly since the mid to late 1990s.

The 1980s saw the introduction of the artist as a celebrity within popular culture. Succeeding Warhol's death in 1987, artists and collectors began to see the financial benefit of successful publicity and promotion, while art magazines and press attention became more important than gallery shows in the market-driven art world. (Morgan 1998, 5) The key period of this investigation concentrates on the development of Superflat art in the late 1990s with a focus on the subsequent and highly acclaimed exhibitions after the turn of the millennium and Murakami's Louis Vuitton handbag collaboration. The work of Murakami

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<sup>4</sup> *Bijutsu Techô*, vol. 55: nos. 835, 840

and that of the premier artists he manages via Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.<sup>5</sup> will be discussed in Chapter Two, focusing on Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano, their engagements in Europe and America, concerns with youth and popular culture and anime and manga sources.

Murakami's combination of scholarship and commercial savvy also make his work accessible to both academic and popular tastes. Complex ambitions melded into cartoon-like simplicity speak loudly in a broad range of markets, opening the Japanese establishment to contemporary art and helping to explain contemporary Japan to the world. In the professional art field, as well as the public sphere, Superflat artists are often confronted by the expectation of establishing and maintaining a critical position. Murakami demonstrates his production-based approach to art by including a fully-functional Louis Vuitton retail shop in his 2006-2009 retrospective exhibition, ©MURAKAMI, producing the commercial items and souvenirs for the museum gift shop and designing an album cover and animated music video for rap star Kanye West.

This thesis focuses on Murakami's contemporary art practice and persona in a global context. Murakami is an important example of a transnational artist who is able to collaborate with other kinds of producers, while still maintaining the profile of a fine artist. His engagements with multiple activities and collaborations with individuals, institutions and commercial organisations both within Japan and Asia, as well as the United States and Europe, expand outside the visual art world and have resulted in new connections between fine art and fashion, music and popular media. Murakami's Superflat concept is both accessible and timely, while also able to stand up in the realm of museums, academics and critics.

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<sup>5</sup> Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. is an art production company that operates in many fields, from the management and promotion of artists, the organisation and implementation of the art festival GEISAI, and production of art-related merchandise and animation. The company was started in 2001 and evolved from its predecessor, the Hiropon Factory, which was founded in 1996. (source: <http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/>)

The term *kaikaikiki* has been defined in American press as "something both elegant and bizarre." (Smith 2001, B36; Carol Vogel also uses this same definition in The New York Times April 2, 2008, probably from Smith)



Superflat art in the continuing age of mass media (from Pop to the transnational), hyper-consumption and hybrid cultural identities are the principal themes of the thesis. In the thesis questions are asked as to how can Superflat re-work the way exhibitions (and the ever-popular museum shop) are curated, advertised and experienced? What is unique about the way Superflat is addressing the high/low division, and can it overcome the stigma of commercialism? Is its unabashed approach to consumption and marketability to surviving the art world sustainable? Is it a celebration or critique, or can it (does it have to) offer both? This thesis seeks to reveal the limitations of existing rhetoric and present a thorough analysis of the multi-dimensional concepts and complex relationships that further problematise the contested, and often simplified, understandings of Superflat art, whereby Murakami's work is both defended as a critique and exposure of post-capitalist conditions, debated as a valid form of visual art that uses traditional techniques, and decried as a celebration of the lack of distinction between art and product. This thesis seeks to reveal the limitations of existing rhetoric and present a thorough analysis of the multi-dimensional concepts and complex relationships that further problematise the contested, and often simplified, understandings of Superflat art.

Murakami would have it that we believe that his practice is uniquely Japanese. This could be seen as a strategic commodification of Japanese identity, not unlike Japonisme in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the image of Japanese based on selected exports. (see Kikuchi and Watanabe 1997; McVeigh 1996; Minami 2001; Shimada 2002) Although he has increased the interest in contemporary art from Japan internationally, he presents conflicting ideas about a Japanese culture based on consumption with little connection to tradition or history prior to American occupation, while using titles that reference Buddhism and ancient figures, whose deeper meaning is usually lost outside of Japan. Establishing the historical connection requires, or assumes, the audience to possess some kind of instant understanding of Eastern

religion and tradition in order to attain the implied depth. Flatness serves as both an aesthetic and the conceptual notion behind Superflat theory, where contemporary Japanese society is seen to lack depth and can therefore be described as “super flat.” Horizontal painting compositions, flat planes of colour and rejection of the highly moralised linear or Renaissance perspective practiced by the West reflect the stylistic conventions of eighteenth century Japanese painters. Furthermore, by consistently portraying his artwork and his practice as representative of Japanese cultural identity, Murakami presents a limited range of images of what it means to be Japanese and reinforces the dichotomy of East and West.

By tracing (or constructing) a lineage to the past, however, Murakami’s Superflat art engages in an ongoing historical process whereby the present is part of a continuum, rather than the latter side of a ruptured binary. Murakami’s Superflat concepts imply that contemporaneity must not be seen as occupying a place of opposition to tradition. In this way, Murakami’s curatorial endeavors are a kind of historicist revival by which he is “curating Japaneseness.” (Weisenfeld 2007, 183) He has established an explicit strategy to gain success and popularity by selling his work in the United States and European art markets, thereby integrating his work into the Western market structure.

The Kaikaiki website states that Murakami is "working from the inside to portray 'Japanese-ness' as a tool to bring about revolution in the world of art." Murakami lays out this strategy of exportation and re-importation of his new form of contemporary Japanese art in *Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Die?*:

My path follows these three steps:

1. First, gain recognition on site (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavoring to meet the needs of the venue.
2. With its recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavorings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps entirely modify the works to meet Japanese tastes.

3. Back overseas, into the fray. This time, I will make a presentation that doesn't shy away from my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience (Murakami 2001, 131).

Murakami constructs a global brand identity by deploying his perceived Japanese identity, albeit originally presented as a hybrid culture. While simultaneously affirming its authenticity, Murakami reveals that Superflat is the commodification of a constructed cultural identity, the image of Japan based on selected imports, redolent of Japonisme of the late 19th century.

While acknowledging the impact of American popular culture, Murakami emphasises a unique Japanese identity in Superflat art, thereby distinguishing it from Western art. With its multiple layers and hybrid form, there is no single point of origin of the subjects and techniques of Superflat. The crossing of cultures and genres gives the history, or histories, of Superflat a significant level of complexity. Therefore, identifying Superflat art as Japanese limits the critical analyses of the work. At the same time, Murakami explicitly references signifiers of Western modernist and postmodernist art, while also relying on the imagined constructions of Japanese identity in order to facilitate interest and understanding in Western audiences. This thesis considers Japanese identity as part of a larger art-historical analysis and as it relates to Murakami's practice, as well as the commodification of Superflat art.

## **Literature Review**

The interpretation of Superflat in relation to postmodern theory is useful, and this thesis will attempt to expand its application beyond the limitations of postmodernism in Western philosophical terms. The widespread effects of globalisation constitute the cultural reality in which we live today, and Murakami's Superflat concept and art practice exemplify the tensions that characterise the constructed identities of art and commercial culture.

Victoria Lu, Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, describes an “ultra new

vision in contemporary art,” recognizing the creative development and “self-identity of the new generation” with aesthetic tastes influenced by popular culture and digital environments, combined with the limitless desires of consumers. (Lu 2004, 18-19) The art historian and curator Midori Matsui indicates that the effects of Western modernisation on contemporary artistic production in Japan have made young Japanese artists "cultural immigrants" within their own society:

Pop signifies the mind that creates a unique dialect within an oppressive major culture... Immigrants, children and consumers compose the network of an anti-discipline... the ‘minor’ producers become majorities in a globalized world.” (2007, 37)

According to Matsui, Superflat refuses to be categorized as “homogeneously Japanese” (Matsui 2007, 34), while offering a precedent for Japanese art with a universal appeal, opening the Japanese establishment to contemporary art and helping to explain contemporary Japan to the world (Matsui 2007, 37). Matsui is a key author, and, at the time of this thesis, she has produced the most extensive and original art historical texts specifically regarding Murakami’s work as it relates to other Japanese contemporary artists and the changing art scene in Japan. Matsui sees the strategies of Superflat artists as a "positive reintegration of Japanese ‘infantile’ subculture into an art movement for the reinvention of new artistic expression." (2001, 55) Murakami believes that young people are able to reinvigorate their inner spirits and “feel alive” through an “ability to concentrate on meaningless things.” (Murakami 2003, n.p.) Perhaps this feeling described by Murakami is part of the nostalgic desire by adults who consistently turn to infantile subject matter. Matsui sees this approach as a subversive one, and she explains that these artists “deliberately adopt ‘childish’ gestures in order to make a subversive attack on the ideological structure that keeps the Japanese infantile.” (Matsui 2001, 55)

The popular American English text, *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, covers various forms of popular culture, including music, pop songs and

idols, as well as manga, anime, video games, television and films. It is mostly comprised of scholarly writing by Japanese specialists and deals directly with themes of how Japanese society has changed in the late twentieth century, its growing popularity, gender and social roles, family life conditions, Japan's cultural identity and ideas on beauty, love, work and death. Analyses of common western stereotypes of Japan and the role and effects of mass media on cultural exchange locate the contextual backdrop of the era of "Cool Japan."<sup>6</sup> (McGray 2002)

Like Pop art, Superflat is simultaneously a product and a reflection of global information society. Superflat art, however, has a perspective which can only be fully understood against the modern history of Japan, including both Japanese cultural experience, or ethnicity, and the integration of Western models and viewpoints. Margrit Brehm calls the situation of contemporary art in Japan "a balancing act between high and low art." (2002, 10) Marked by an ability to "handle the overwhelming mass of available information," Japanese contemporary artists, Brehm suggests, have given rise to "New Pop" (or "J-Pop"), which must be understood as a subculture defined by its societal references. In her comparison of new and old Pop, she describes differences in function:

Compared to Pop Art, postmodern New Pop thus goes a decisive step further: Warhol made the brave new world of commodities *worthy of being depicted*, defined the work of art as a product of the division of labour and thus questioned the individual gesture of the *ingenious* artist as the basis of art. The works of New Pop too, are developed from the culture of a mass society, but here the focus is no longer on adapting the existing image, but on inventing new images (this time, also by an *art-director-genius*) which function just like the media images. (Brehm 2002, 15)

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<sup>6</sup> Since coined by Douglas McGray, the Japanese government has adopted the "Cool Japan" idea, and a Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) was established in June 2010 to promote "cultural industries", such as certain types of manga, and also organized a conference on "Cool Japan".

Superflat escalates what Pop Art had started by further challenging established divisions, hierarchies and values of art and commodity. Additionally, the world now offers the constant media saturation through the television and the virtuality of the computer, which further distorts images of reality. Reality itself is altered and experienced through the visual image. Jean Baudrillard indicates that the real world is obsolete, and artificiality is our contemporary reality. In the interrogation of Superflat's position in art history, this thesis considers Walter Benjamin's analysis of cultural products and death of the aura and Baudrillard's concepts of the "hyperreal," "hypermarket" and "absolute merchandise." (Benjamin 1935/6; Baudrillard 1996) Post-modern philosopher Arthur C. Danto's idea of the "post-historical period" of art in *Beyond the Brillo Box* (1992) and other writings in the 1990s indicate that the established trajectory of Western Art changed since Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964 and gave rise to pluralism, forever changing the way art is made and exhibited.

Marc Steinberg, whose 2002 MA thesis became the basis for several publications on Superflat in 2003 and 2004, demonstrates a theoretical approach that links Murakami's work with contemporary digital culture and the aesthetic of metamorphosis via "new seriality." (2003) Steinberg sees Superflat as a logic of surface-ness that is a condition of what he calls "cybernetic" capitalism. To Steinberg, Superflat is less an expression of a Japanese sensibility and more an aesthetic that is informed by the presence of technology and digital environments in a globalised world. (Steinberg 2003, 2004a, 2004b)

The simplification of Japanese identity also problematises the reception of the work in the West. An article in *Art in America*, which reviewed the final installment of Murakami's *Superflat* trilogy of exhibitions in New York, acknowledges the lack of credibility in "yesterday's Western stereotype of Japan as a land of Zen gardens and geishas" (Heartney 2005, 59) but goes on to refer to Murakami's character, "Mr. DOB" (who will be known hereafter throughout this thesis as "Dob"), as a "Japanized version of Mickey Mouse" and a

"Warholian strategy." Eleanor Heartney's interpretation of the show's purpose reveals an American reading of the presentation:

The show painted a picture of a Japan unwilling to grow up, mired in suppressed memories awash in fantasies of power and redemption; simultaneously, it revealed the seductiveness of sentimentality, nostalgia, resentment and self-abasement. As such, "Little Boy" presented a timely warning about the aftermath of hubris and the intractable hold of a past that has been conveniently swept from view. (Heartney 2005, 61)

Murakami's work is said to blur the line between fine art and commercial practice, and it is often seen as a result of his Japanese cultural identity, where there was no difference between "art" and "craft" or that there was no word for "art" in the Japanese language until the Meiji Period, when the Japanese government imported Western models for technology, education and fine art. For example, Raphael Rubinstein refers to Murakami's mixing of art and product as a "very old Japanese blending" (2001, 112). This simplistic view is problematic, as it characterises Murakami's work as representative of Japan itself, and Japaneseness as synonymous with consumeristic and having no means of resistance to commodity culture or the transcending ability attributed to Western Art. Furthermore, one must also consider the popularity that Murakami's work sought and received in the United States and Europe, a result of exporting an aesthetic that is pleasing and palatable to Western audiences, who view it as exotic and Japanese. When presented to Japanese audiences, however, it is in fact a presentation of the Western view of Japanese culture.

While this strategy for success in the art world has achieved global recognition for Superflat artists and renewed interest in Japanese contemporary artists, Yoshiko Shimada argues that Superflat presents a "Western-approved, stereotypical cliché of Japanese culture" and goes on to state that, "one cannot help but feeling this as a renewed, collaborative Orientalism." (2002, 188-9) As Murakami employs associations with the "Cool Japan" trend (McGray 2002) to increase his popularity and sales of his work, he is also heavily and

frequently criticised for the association with consumption and mass production. Murakami argues that despite the lack of recognition from the high art world, there is a general interest in aesthetic value and original creative expression within the consumption of commercial culture. For example, Murakami was one of the judges on the television show *Everyone's a Picasso*, in which amateur participants have their artwork judged by successful and professionally trained artists. Although the art establishment has largely ignored these activities, Murakami is disparaging of this separation between classes of artists based on this recognition.

*Comiket*, a comic fair at which Murakami exhibited some of his early *otaku*-inspired sculptural works, is a platform for the display and sale of both amateur and professional manga artists. Murakami argues that the general public and the majority of audiences do not care or understand (or want to understand) this type of high/low distinction of professional and amateur, or fine and commercial, proposed and enforced by the art establishment, and therefore, he can disregard the views of art critics in favour of popular opinion. (Nakamura 2001, 26) This thesis examines the Murakami's reception in the West, his strategies for success in the art world within Japan, the United States and Europe, as well as the activities of Superflat artists. Although *otaku* will be briefly discussed in Chapter One, for a more extensive critical examination of the *otaku* subculture, the critic Hiroki Azuma has published and presented extensively on the topic of *otaku* in Japanese and English and has discussed Murakami's art and persona in relation to the *otaku* subculture.

Another Japanese art critic, Noi Sawaragi, was one of Murakami's early supporters and the first to seriously analyse the anime and manga trends in Japanese contemporary art. By incorporating the already historicised and highly marketed anime and manga genre, contemporary art from Japan "propelled its own historicisation." (Tachiki 2004, 56) Dirlik



argues that the quest for “essential” cultural values undermines the diversity of the East Asian region, thereby perpetuating a form of self-Orientalising:

These developments are part of a resurgence of ethnicity that has accompanied globalisation, and in many ways are its products. It is the irony of contemporary anti-Eurocentric movements that they themselves are entrapped in the history and geography of Orientalism. In other words, the very effort to counteract Eurocentrism is bound by the categories of a Eurocentric Orientalism. (1999, 167)

Dirlik also draws attention to the crucial role that EuroAmerican theorists have played in the “articulation of Asian values in their most recent appearance.” (1999, 167) While recognizing the limitations and implications of existing Eurocentric assumptions and how such ideas have been internalized, this thesis takes a transnational approach to questions of identity through the exchange of art and merchandise (are they one and the same?) and investigates the impact of such cultural products on contemporary art debates.

Murakami claims that he is "really interested in exact Japanese culture" and says, "in Japan I cannot present art in a very straight way. It is so hard, so I must make a twist." (Nakamura 2001, 26) This twist is found by extending his work and his persona beyond the art establishment and into other arenas where people engage with art, yet they may not be familiar with his fine art or gallery work. By first attracting their attention and gaining their interest in those sites, he leads them into the fine art side of his Superflat world and "educates" them about his ideas. Although Murakami once stated that “nothing new is coming out of the Japanese art scene” and “there is no new philosophy” (Wakasa 2000, n.p.), he is credited with creating a bridge for cultural products to enter into fine arts. (Tachiki 2004, 56)

Murakami's Superflat method of exploring consumer culture through contemporary art has sparked a wave of both criticism and worship of his work over the last twenty years. The incorporation of commercial practice is a point of contention and criticism of Murakami's work. Superflat may capture a new aesthetic for the ambiguous future of the

twenty-first century with its bright colors, shiny appearances, precise craftsmanship and seductive forms. These characteristics also give the work qualities shared by the commodities it supposedly should question. This conflict of interest resides in the contemporary art world, which itself could be considered a subculture, where artists are often trained formally in art school, yet professional success requires marketability, "cool"-ness, and technological knowledge. The seemingly transparent position of catering to the consumer market is condemned as opportunistic, and even meaningless, and Murakami is accused of being an "imitation Warhol" and a "style rider" (Saltz 1999).

Adrian Searle's review of Murakami's 2002 solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London went so far as to suggest that "in order to take in the sly, self-conscious and hyper-sophisticated cartoony artiness of what he does... you need to be Japanese and addicted to manga comics... or under 10 years old, or the kind of adult who likes to wear nappies." The racist nature of Searle's view carries over from a larger socio-political view of Japan, its lack of originality and copying of Western culture. Searle also claims that Murakami's work is not art, "only a feeble sort of entertainment" and goes on to liken Murakami to Mark Kostabi:

Murakami reminds me of Mark Kostabi, whose cynical, idiot-friendly paintings prove that no price is too high, no intellectual threshold too low, to make it in the art world... There's no sign of internal critique, just a lot of very high-class production values.

Searle's critique relies on the presumption that art is inherently deep and meaningful, while commercial forms are superficial, meaningless "entertainment," presenting a binary division between high and low, which is the dilemma that characterises the Postmodern. Michael Darling points out the prominence of the Kantian value system in the art world in the *Superflat* exhibition catalogue:

Modern artists are not supposed to make baubles; they are supposed to produce objects that either transcend or critique filthy lucre, despite the fact that art itself is an expensive

commodity.

Curator Dana Friis-Hansen, although impressed by Murakami's presentation and profile in the international art scene, also takes issue, this time with his breakthrough works, such as *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy*, and says, "One is certainly left to wonder whether the high stakes of his recent large-scale projects, along with their increasing visibility in the popular media, might not have distracted him from his earlier, more serious cultural concerns." (Friis-Hansen 1999, 31) In order to locate depth and meaning in Murakami's work, Friis-Hansen finds it necessary to refer to his earlier works, *Polyrhythm* (1990) and *Randoseru Project* (1991). For Murakami's *Randoseru Project*, he collected hides of endangered and exotic species and had them brightly dyed and fabricated into the distinctive backpacks carried by schoolchildren (called "randoseru" in Japanese) that were adopted in the late 19th century based on a Western military model. Despite the critical praise of the earlier works for their political implications, Murakami has continuously refused any political implications, resisted the critical commentary and praise, and referred to the piece as a joke:

'Randoseru,' my early work, got a really good reaction from the art scene," he told me. "But I hate that reaction. It looks like political art, but I am just joking. (in Lubow, 2005).

On the other hand, at the opening of the exhibition in which they were shown, a Shinto Priest was invited to honour the animals' departed souls in prayer, thus supporting the argument that his work was indeed more serious than Murakami suggests by stating that he was "just joking." The irony here is Murakami's insistence on light-heartedness to the more seriously-received work, such as *Randoseru Project*, in contradiction to the heavy theorising he imposes on the later work, which is criticised for being superficial and childish. University

of Arts Tokyo<sup>7</sup> Associate Professor, Yoshitaka Mōri, also expresses disappointment in Murakami's move from the more "politically critical" early works:

It is rather disappointing to see the depoliticization of Murakami's works, as his works in the early 1990s shared a much more politically critical connotation before he adopted subcultural practices as a methodological reference. For instance, he was more critical of Japanese history in his early work *Randosel* [sic] *Project...* It was interesting to me because, while normally *randosel* are made of black or red leather, his works were produced in colourful leather from animals which were proscribed under the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). It also should be noted that the first *randosel* was originally made for a Japanese emperor, and that the leather industry has been historically managed by an outcast group known as *burakumin*.<sup>8</sup> The project can be understood as a critical evaluation of Japanese modern history and education as well as beautiful art. Sadly, his political acumen has declined as his success in the international art world has grown. (Mōri 2006, 185).

When directly asked if his work is a critique of capitalism, Murakami describes a more primitive desire to create, again distancing the work from its perceived political commentary that both Japanese and Western critics claim is needed:

This is a language. You know, this is our world. Creators cannot create the world. That's why they have to make artwork. The reason cannot always be understood... When the artist is standing behind the canvas, there is a very big fear, because this is an adventure world. That very primitive and pure spirit is super important for the artist, and it doesn't link with the situation in society. The artist just wants to make a painting, just wants to make something. There doesn't have to be a reason. It's a very primitive desire, and it happens suddenly. So, basically, the artist doesn't have to be thinking about anything... That's why foolish people make things. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

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<sup>7</sup> The Tokyo University of Arts was formerly known as Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, a merger of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and the Tokyo Music School (both founded in 1887). In 2004, following the incorporation of Japan's national universities, the institution became the National University Corporation Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku: The University of the Arts Tokyo.

<sup>8</sup> *Buraku* is a Japanese word, which originally referred to a village or hamlet, but in the Meiji period it acquired a particular connotation in relation to former outcast communities in the Edo period. Although they were officially emancipated in the early Meiji period, the discrimination against them has continued in society, in particular in inequality of job opportunities and marriage. (text taken from Mōri's original footnote) [The current use of the term, Burakumin, is generally considered to be politically incorrect.]

In addition to creating work that either unconsciously or intentionally addresses the social effects of post-capitalist society, the artists of Murakami's Superflat generation are still haunted by the remnants of the previous generation's World War II trauma through their cultural inheritance. The source of their inherited trauma is highlighted in Alexandra Munroe's catalogue for the 1994-5 exhibition *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. The catalogue documents the Japanese postwar avant-garde movement, including the Gutai Group and Hi Red Center, among others, who were prominent and influential in the American and European art scenes. In the early 1990s, the international art world began to pay attention to East Asian contemporary art, and exhibitions in the West began to feature Japanese art. In 1989, the exhibition, *Against Nature*, first shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was the first survey of Japanese Contemporary Art in the United States in a decade, and *A Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors*, was held at the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art and two other U.S. venues in 1990. The following year saw *Zones of Love: Contemporary Art from Japan* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and *A Cabinet of Signs: Contemporary Art from Post-modern Japan* at Tate Liverpool.

Fran Lloyd's 2002 publication, *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, brings together a range of perspectives from scholars, curators and journalists on themes of sex and consumption in Japanese art. Together, the essays provide a timely cultural analysis of the socio-political conditions of contemporary society after the "Cool Japan" phase of the 1990s, and the text includes some of the ideas that informed Murakami at the cusp of his burgeoning career. The analysis of the complexities of consumerism and sex in Japanese art includes Murakami as representative of the *otaku* generation and places his work at a point of departure when examining current attitudes about sex and corporeality in social and economic engagements. Also central to this thesis, links between art and consumption

are explored in Lloyd's book, though the issues in Lloyd also extend to representations of race and gender in film and digital media in a wider context.

Murakami's generation of Japanese born in the 1960s has sometimes been referred to as *shinjinrui*, literally meaning "new race" or "new breed." They are the sons and daughters of the postwar generation and have formed their own unique responses to the conditions of a de-humanised contemporary society. Under the impact of both the culture of consumption during the 1980s bubble economy and increasingly popular culture of anime, manga, videogames, digital technology and mobile media, they have created a hybrid form of Pop art, dubbed "Micropop" by Matsui. (2007) Micropop artists, according to Matsui, have a unique identity through creative engagement without being constrained by the "umbrella" of Japan or pigeon-holed under the banner of "Japanese art." (2007, 37) Although Matsui opens up her grouping to include young artists outside of Murakami's Superflat, as a relative but alternative development in Japanese art, she acknowledges that Murakami offers a "precedent for a Japanese art with a universal appeal." (2007, 37) This thesis examines the relevance and significance of Japanese identity and specific generational cultural experience in the Superflat concept and style and highlights consumerist practices and the criticism it carries.

## **Plan of Chapters**

The investigation of the historical and conceptual relevance of Murakami's early works leading up to his current commercial ventures highlights the historical context of the generation of Japanese born in the late 1960s and 1970s to which he belongs. This thesis will also introduce the formation of Superflat as a model for a new form of hybrid art produced by a refined and thoughtful mixing of Western and Japanese cultures. The theme of war in Superflat art and anime and manga images, as well as Murakami's fine art training in late 19<sup>th</sup> century *nihonga* painting techniques, are explored in Chapter One.

Chapter One includes emphasis on the activities and exchange between the United States and Japan in contemporary culture, particularly with the heavy importation of American products to Japan in the 1980s, Japanese youth culture of the 1990s, *otaku* culture, and the role of manga in Japanese social history and cultural production. A renewed application of Orientalism and the idea of otherness, or the exotic, are revealed within the process of identity formation in Superflat art. Superflat motifs of mushrooms and multiple eyes are examined closely in relation to the atomic bombs' flattening of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan's subsequent post-defeat culture of fantasy. Chapter One discusses issues of (or the desire to find) authenticity and originality in Japanese society and how this relates to Superflat art and theory.

Murakami is credited with a new reading of Pop, giving "Japanese Neo Pop" (JNP) and Tokyo Pop a new and different position than that of American or New York Pop. (Brehm 2002, Matsui 2007) Neo-pop and Jeff Koons are also discussed in Chapter One, along with the developing work of Murakami and his contemporary, Yoshitomo Nara, in Tokyo and New York. Murakami's two enormous signature works of the 1990s, *Hiropop* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* demonstrate Murakami's invention of "Poku," a combination of Pop and *otaku*. "Poku" is Murakami's unique response to his "failure" to become an otaku king, which would have required total submersion into the underground subculture and passing many memory-based tests of expertise on certain anime characters and films. (Itoi 2001, 134) The development of Murakami's famous morphing Dob character in relation to the cuteness phenomenon in Japanese culture, Murakami's self-Orientalising process, and the idea of Japan's "Disneyfication" is analysed as part of a lineage concerning the Westernisation and modernisation in Japan.

Chapter Two continues to examine and scrutinise Murakami's suggested lineage of Superflat art to the Edo (early or pre- modern) period, as well as the effects of Westernisation

during the Meiji (modern) period. Chapter Two also focuses on Murakami's *Superflat Theory of Japanese Art* and traces Superflat art both formally and conceptually as a style and a strategy via the series of international group exhibitions of Superflat artists and accompanying writings by Murakami and other curators. This section will look at the work of Superflat "disciples" of the Kaikaikiki Company, mainly Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano, their popularity and marketability, as well as the various Superflat stylistic characteristics they utilise in their works.

Chapter Three analyses the Warhol-inspired "factory" method in relation to Murakami's art practice and celebrity persona. The money-making scandals of Damien Hirst, as well as the effects of postmodernism and relevant philosophical theories on modern and contemporary art will be examined. Chapter Three highlights relevant critical theory, including Walter Benjamin's analysis of cultural products in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and Jean Baudrillard's concepts of the "hyperreal," "hypermarket" and "absolute merchandise" in *Simulacra and Simulation* and *The Perfect Crime*. The emphasis on surface and reproduction and the idea of history being exterminated is explored in Murakami's Superflat concept and in relation to the period of art since the 1960s, identified as Arthur C. Danto's "Post-Historical Period" and Robert C. Morgan's "Post-Warholian Nightmare."

Chapter Four will continue to interrogate current issues of commercialism and consumerism in art through a focus on production, collaboration and business practice, while acknowledging the ongoing (or unresolved) debates and disputes in critical discourse that Superflat shares with Pop art. Chapter Four will discuss Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton designer Marc Jacobs and the presence of a retail shop in the traveling retrospective exhibition ©MURAKAMI. Chapter Four also focuses on Murakami's bi-annual



GEISAI event, its formation and its implications for future generations of artists and art professionals.

Murakami understands that the corporate brand is a universal language and uses it to his advantage as an artist in an effort to communicate. Chapter Four will refer to European predecessors who also integrated art and couture, such as Picasso, as well as Surrealists, Dali and Man Ray. This final chapter will revisit the criticism in the West for lack of originality and sophistication in Murakami's work, as well as the celebrated and highly marketable elements of Superflat work, the Vuitton collaboration, the traveling ©MURAKAMI retrospective exhibition, and the reception and representation of Superflat artists in Tokyo, Paris, London and New York.

Recognising the potentially problematic issue of researching Japan from the West and its associated limitations, this thesis provides original research investigating and discussing the specific impact of the international success of the contemporary Japanese artist, Takashi Murakami, his Kaikai Kiki Company and his Superflat style and concept as a model for cross-cultural exchange. This model brings binary divisions of East and West, and high and low, as well as the hierarchical systems associated with them into question by identifying networks that challenge these structures. Through their hybrid experience in "both" worlds, Japanese contemporary artists are now able to engage with, and possibly deconstruct, the current international art market.

## 1. CULTIVATING AUTHENTICITY: RE-PRESENTING HISTORY

Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child. (Cicero, M. 46 B.C.)

Postwar Japan was given life and nurtured by America. We were shown that the true meaning of life is meaningless, and were taught to live without thought. Our society and hierarchies were dismantled. We were forced into a system that does not produce adults. The collapse of the bubble economy was the predetermined outcome of a poker game only America could win. (Murakami 2005, 152)

### 1.1. Japanese Art as Export: the Superflat Plan and the Western Audience

This thesis argues that in a globalised world, discourse structured on the dichotomy of two opposing cultures of East and West, or Japan and the United States, has lost its relevance. Cultural products have become so intertwined and hybrid that the whole notion of an “original” culture, and its significance, come into question. An analyses of historical tradition in the development of Murakami’s Superflat highlights the relevance of questions like those posed by Curator Susan Edelstein in her catalogue essay accompanying the 2001 British Columbia exhibition, *KYOZON*<sup>9</sup>: “At what point does the exchange become an imposition of one culture at the expense of another?” (Edelstein 2007, 37) The show featured only Japanese artists, including Takashi Murakami, “in order to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary culture in Japan.” (Edelstein 2007, 37) While Superflat art cannot be completely understood without elements of both Japan and the West, it is not fully accepted as an authentic product in either culture alone. Superflat could be regarded in the West as one of the “freakish consequences” of “Japan’s obsessive drive to modernise, and hybridise, identity.” (Munroe 1994, 342)

Murakami began exploring his personal history through the realities of the postwar relationship between Japan and the United States and the imagery of that history of World

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<sup>9</sup> The term “kyozon” is defined in the *KYOZON* exhibition catalogue as the “merging or bringing together of opposite things,” though the definition is closer to “existing together.”

War II. For *Polyrhythm* (1990), he used white plastic toy soldiers affixed to a steel-framed synthetic resin slab. Murakami connects the aggressive mentality of war to the economic concerns, thus equating war violence to capitalist values. He believes that the Japanese have a unique perspective of capitalism based on their experience of losing the war:

In Japan there are neither traditional-oriented old people adhering to transcendental values, nor inner-oriented adults who have internalized their values; instead, the nearly purely relative (or relativistic) competition exhibited by other-oriented children provides the powerful driving force of capitalism. Let's call this *infantile capitalism*. (Murakami in Pury 2008, 259)

Murakami set out to revolutionise art by combining Pop art practice with otaku production, creating a new form of post-Pop called "Poku." Otaku refers to anime and manga fan communities, who are often described as "obsessive" and "hardcore." (see Murakami 2005; Azuma 2005 and 2009) In Japanese, otaku is similar to the English word "geek" or "nerd", and refers to mostly young men and boys who are obsessed with anime and manga to the point of becoming social outcasts. The aim of Poku was to infiltrate art into the otaku market, but Murakami found that he was unable to please the otaku community and therefore declared the project a failure. (Kelmachter 2002, 79) Instead, he set out to concoct a strategy of art marketing that would transform art consumption in Japan and introduce a new form of Japanese art to the West. With his invention of Superflat, Murakami intended to channel the creative processes and popularity of anime and manga consumption into the art field across East and West, locating the moment he "fused those many windows into one." (Murakami 2000, 9)

The art world in the West is searching for the next new theory. This search has reached as far as Asia, a less-Westernized cultural sphere in which Japan, and its capital Tokyo, are receive the most attention. (Murakami 2005, 152)

The advertising put out by the original venue for the 2007-2009 ©MURAKAMI retrospective, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where the exhibition's tour

began, consisted of large colourful (mainly pink) cloth signs along the streets, hanging from telephone poles and palm trees. The message was simple: "©MURAKAMI" and "MOCA" in large lettering, along with an image of the Kaikai and Kiki characters and the exhibition dates. The straightforwardness of the message showed that Murakami's reputation and his work had reached a certain level of familiarity, or even celebrity, in the city that first brought him to the United States eight years before. Unlike in Los Angeles, however, when the ©MURAKAMI retrospective traveled to its second stop, New York's Brooklyn Museum of Art, the publicity materials had a tendency to emphasise the Japaneseness of the artist, labeling him a "Japanese superstar" artist, and included that he is "fusing fine art and popular culture." The posters served to set up an explanation to precede the work on view. The general feeling was, "this is what art is like in Japan."



1.1. Street sign for ©MURAKAMI exhibition at MOCA, Los Angeles, 2007  
Outdoor fabric material  
Approx. 4' x 1.5'  
Photo the author



1.2. New York subway poster for ©MURAKAMI exhibition at Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2008  
Approx. 5' x 3 1/2'  
Photo the author

On the contrary, there was initially little interest in Murakami's Superflat work from Japanese art institutions and commercial galleries, with the exception of Tomio Koyama, the Tokyo gallerist whose knowledge of media and the international art market was critical to Murakami's success overseas. Like Murakami, many art professionals in the Japanese contemporary art scene contend that contemporary art in general is not widely understood and lacks critical debate, lacking a structure for the contemporary gallery system and, in turn, lacks an established market for the circulation of contemporary art works. (Matsui 1999, 25) Murakami was initially criticised in Japan for making work explicitly to sell in the United States. (Shimada 2002) However, his success overseas enabled his profile as an important

contemporary artist when brought back to Japan with the establishment of American and European followings. Murakami explains that this ploy was necessary to gain the respect of the masses:

In Japanese society, the world of contemporary art seems, in some respects, pretty close to collapse. In the United States and Europe, works are sold at very high prices but there is no structure in Japan that makes it possible to reach such high prices. The works by manga authors sells large numbers of copies and those people are very much respected in society: the "kind" of artists that are respected in Japan are not at all the same as abroad... The manga authors or, as we might say, the "stars of the subculture," are still greatly admired by the public, there is also a world that is quite separate, that of "pure art." To a large extent, this is driven by the Japanese inferiority complex in relation to the West. A complex that Japanese society ended up putting to one side by dropping art as a luxury object in order to turn towards art for the masses. So I thought that that was maybe where the real possibilities were... I wanted to exhibit my work in the West, which I see as the homeland of the fine arts from the Japanese perspective. (Kelmachter 2002, 93)

Murakami grew up during a period of economic expansion and imported American pop culture in the 1970s, while Japanese society was (and still is) on a collective and continuous search for new ways to escape the legacy of fear and uncertainty inherited from the previous generation. Murakami's mother had impressed on and often reminded him that his existence was made possible only by the circumstance that the sky above Kokura, her native city, was overcast on the ninth of August in 1945, thus diverting the B-29 bomber airplane to its secondary target, Nagasaki. He was encouraged to study art but wanted to become an animation artist. He decided, however, that he did not have the natural talent required to enter the highly-saturated anime and manga market. Instead, he enrolled in the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, and nearly twelve years later, succeeded in earning his PhD in fine art, specifically, *nihonga*. Nihonga, literally meaning "Japanese painting," refers to a late nineteenth century form of traditional Japanese art that was considered to be a nationalist response against Western styles of the time, such as Impressionism. Nihonga was actually a revival of traditional Japanese painting after oil

painting (*abura-e* or *yusai-ga*) had acquired the name *yōga*, meaning Western-style painting during the Meiji period. (Tomii 1994, 307) It was during the Meiji period that the institution currently known as The Tokyo University of the Arts, where Murakami completed his PhD in 1993, was established with the aim of developing and supporting a narrative of Japanese art history. Murakami chose to study nihonga in order to become a "highly skilled craftsman" like the postwar manga artist Osamu Tezuka or the eighteenth century painter Itō Jakuchū (*KaikaiKiki Reports* 30 July 09). In the mid-1990s, however, Murakami moved to New York to complete an Asian Cultural Council fellowship at P.S.1 International Studio Program and began to think of his traditional painters' lifestyle as "boring." He had been represented for some time by the Tomio Koyama Gallery, a part of the Tokyo art scene's elite, and he was looking for new ideas and a larger market. He then started creating anime-based characters, thinking about brand identity and conceiving his *Theory of Superflat Japanese Art*.

Blum and Poe Gallery, Murakami's representation in Los Angeles, was the first to show his work in the United States, and its subsequent success lies in their transnational way of dealing art. Tim Blum speaks fluent Japanese and travels to Japan regularly, while Jeff Poe has his roots in Los Angeles and Europe. The development of cross-cultural relationships is, according to Blum, critical to the success of their gallery. (Kinney 2004, 8) Blum also takes credit for using the phrase "it's super flat" to describe the work shown in Murakami's first solo exhibition at Blum and Poe Gallery. Murakami was drawn to the description and came up with "superflat" as a term to describe his theory and practice, which he also thought was "a very good marketing word." (Kaplan 2001, 95)

It was not until 2001, after the success of his *Superflat* exhibition in the United States, that Murakami was given a solo exhibition in Japan at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. However, it was still unusual for a young Japanese artist be granted a solo exhibition at a large municipal art gallery in Tokyo, who regularly attract "big name" overseas artists.

(Minami 2003) His work was accepted immediately into art discourse in the United States, while in Japan it was still connected with otaku because of his initial "Poku" (Pop + otaku) focus.

Although Superflat may have carried the label of "art" in Japan, it never escaped its subcultural identity. But in America, where the hierarchy of genres is well-established, the exhibition was immediately accepted into the critical discourse of art. In the same Western context, the exhibition was invited to France as an "art exhibition," plain and simple. (Murakami 2005, 157)

While his initial profile in Japan is that of an artist, his identity is now equally associated with commercial work, such as his design work for the Louis Vuitton brand. In contrast, although his earlier and more traditionally artistic practices are lesser known in the West, the more commercial work is shown within the fine art context of galleries and museums. At the same time, it is in the United States that he is frequently, and sometimes viciously, criticised for his blatant commercialism and art marketing. Furthermore, Murakami gained success through both commercial and fine art outlets. He is recognised as an artist in both Japan and the West, while his work is disseminated mainly through commercial forms, such as plush toys and other merchandise, and via gallery and museum exhibitions of paintings and sculptures in the United States and Europe. In this way, Murakami has blurred the division between the categories of art and product within his practice.

Murakami self-consciously positions Superflat in the context of the global art market by drawing on anime and manga sources. In this respect, the work functions similarly to its sources, as exported cultural products, while also inserting a Japanese aesthetic into the fine art market as an easily palatable commodity. Superflat communicates cultural specificity outside of Japan through a Western art framework and art markets. By stating his intention of establishing his profile as an artist in New York, Paris and London, however, his position centralises the United States and Europe, rather than challenging the Western position of authority:



Currently, the ivory castle of contemporary art is the U.S. and Europe, in other words, the West. It is certainly not Japan, China, or Australia. The influence of the U.S., and New York in particular, is still as powerful as ever. (Murakami 2001, 130)

Superflat demonstrates a challenge to Western art history by offering "icons of excessive otherness," (Matsui 2001, 48) a strategic use of Japanese identity to effect a recognition of cultural specificity within the Western art context. By emphasising the cultural uniqueness of Superflat, Murakami also becomes vulnerable to criticism that he is merely providing an Orientalist spectacle for Western audiences. (Shimada 2002, 188-9) By emphasising identity characteristics from the existing aesthetic database shared by Japan and the West, Murakami can be seen as affirming rather than rethinking or challenging the idea that Japan's unique identity is its hybridity. Superflat, however, is successful in the strategic manipulation of these characteristics that presents a fusion of both Westernised and Japanised visual elements and goes beyond simple juxtaposition. Murakami continues to present a self-Orientalist position that takes the simplified concept of lacking distinctions between art and commodity as a trait of Japaneseness. He identifies Japan as a "Superflat society" (2000, 9), which relies heavily on the idea that Japan is a homogeneous society. Furthermore, the perception of homogeneity is heavily contested by cultural critics and scholars. (see Kikuchi 2004; Said 1995)

In some ways, Murakami's strategy parallels that of the late nineteenth century Japanese government during the Meiji period of Westernisation, when objects were created specifically for the Western market. (see Kikuchi 2004) Thus, objects were self-Orientalised to capitalise on their cultural "other"-ness. With this in mind, Murakami can also be seen as propagating the potentially precarious notion of new Orientalism, or what Rosenblum refers to as "a fresh version of Japonisme for the twenty-first century." (2002, 80) The most popular objects in both the "Japan Craze" of the late nineteenth century and "Cool Japan" of the 1990s are considered to be ethnically unique commodities, largely consumed by the

general public. In addition, in both cases, art and design from Japan is considered to be a new source of inspiration. (Nakashima 2006, 259) However, even when Japanese prints became influential to Impressionism in the 1880s in France, Renoir made a statement that Lambourne calls a "prophecy," perhaps because of the contemporary fears of globalisation mentioned earlier in the Introduction.

Japanese prints are certainly very interesting as Japanese prints in other words as long as they stay in Japan... people should not appropriate what belongs to another race; in so doing they are apt to make stupid mistakes. There would be soon a kind of universal art, without any individual characteristics. (Renoir in Lambourne , 226)

Matsui locates Murakami's work as a form of postcolonial resistance in opposition to the Western art historical canon. She emphasises the ability for Murakami's art to convey the anguish of the postwar generation that came of age at the height of material prosperity in the 1980s, yet remain ambiguous, refusing to be categorized as "homogeneously Japanese" art or as a demonstration of a new sensibility of techno-oriented youth (Matsui 1994, 34). At the same time, the artists embody contemporary stereotypes and rely on tropes of identification. This deliberate self-Orientalising, an act intended to express a form of colonial resistance, tends to reproduce, rather than challenge, the Japan/West dichotomy. Murakami also acknowledges the identity politics at the *Coloriage* exhibition held in the Fondation Cartier, Paris:

New *Japonisme*, or post *Japonisme*... they came not out of the Western "art," but out of the genres that are called subculture in the West. That is the coloring book created by Japan. (in Kelmachter 2002, 104)

## **1.2. Postwar Identity Complex: Little Boy and Big Brother**

The import of American-style materialism, something that the Japanese had resisted and fought against immediately prior to World War II, occurred for over three decades following World War II and led to the economic boom known as the "bubble economy," its subsequent bursting in the late 1980s, followed by a long period of recession. Although the country has, at the time of this thesis, virtually recovered from the recession felt in Japan throughout the 1990s, the result of such a long-standing and debilitating state was increased corruption, crime, child prostitution and suicide. In her 2002 publication, *The Japanese Experience-Inevitable*, Margrit Brehm identifies an "internal contradiction" as the point of departure for "New Pop." Brehm indicates that the excessive consumerism can be interpreted as a "value vacuum hidden behind the beautiful façade" (2002, 14) and appoints Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami as the Japanese representatives of the New Pop genre, or, as she calls them, "the sons of the economic miracle" (2002, 14). Perhaps more a division between followers or audiences of the two artists, Brehm assigns Murakami and Nara to two different schools of the 1990s, each regarded as the most popular representative of his school. (2002, 10)

Although frequently categorised as belonging to the same genre, and having often exhibited their works side by side as they gained international attention, the methods of production and distribution employed by artists Nara and Murakami remain different. Nara is best known for his drawings of an angry little girl, who is often cursing or smoking cigarettes. Nara is equally suited within the more raw movements of street art and punk, now made "legitimate" to a certain extent by the museum and gallery world,<sup>10</sup> whereas Murakami is seen as the "Japanese Andy Warhol" and king of the commercial.

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<sup>10</sup> See Tate Modern exhibition, *Street Art*, or the Baltic's *Spank the Monkey*, both in 2008.



1.3. *Damn it all*, 2001  
Yoshitomo Nara  
Colour pencil and crayon on paper  
12"H x 9 1/2"W  
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Highly saturated by instantly recognizable super-cute Hello Kitty imagery, both artists belong to the *shinjinrui* generation defined by the Japan Society as “materialist, pleasure-seeking Japanese' born after 1960 and frowned upon by their parents.”<sup>11</sup> Murakami's Superflat art illustrates and attempts to understand the confusion of a generation who did not experience first hand the devastation of the second World War, but were handed down the experience of a post-defeat culture and questions of identity during a period of mass economic growth and Americanisation, certainly heightened by the shock of the bubble economy experience, its bursting, and the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989. Hirohito had been a symbol of the previous generation, as well as the trauma of the wartime relationship between the United States and Japan. The subsequent removal of the Japanese military and

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<sup>11</sup> From *Asia Source*, a resource of The Asia Society, [www.asiasource.org](http://www.asiasource.org), visited 25 January 2008.

the official renunciation of war during postwar American occupation was symbolic of a kind of national castration.

General Douglas MacArthur revealed the way the United States viewed the Japanese as a nation after the war, when he patronizingly referred to Japan as a "boy of twelve" during Senate hearings, and the Japanese admiration for the General nearly evaporated. Ironically, when MacArthur was relieved of his duties by President Truman in 1951, thousands of Japanese lined the streets, weeping, as he parted. (Nathan 2004, 238) General MacArthur, emblematic of the role of the United States in Japan at the time, maintained a powerful position as a benefactor. The (in)famous 1945 photo of the tiny-statured (by comparison) Emperor Hirohito, as he stands beside General Douglas MacArthur, is emblematic of the stereotypical role of America as Japan's big brother. General MacArthur holds himself rather leisurely, with an open collar and hands on hips, and with little expression shown on his face. Emperor Hirohito stands remarkably stiff and dressed in the formal attire of coat and tails, holding his chin up as if trying to appear taller, yet only reaching the height of General MacArthur's slouched shoulders. MacArthur declined to visit the Emperor in his palace and had ordered Hirohito to present himself at the United States embassy when the General had arrived from the Philippines. The day after the photo was taken and published in the Tokyo morning newspapers, MacArthur was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* saying, "Japan has fallen to a fourth-rate nation." (MacArthur quoted in Nathan 2004, 13) Japanese history from that time into the 1980s was principally about economic recovery, while Japan focused on embracing Americanisation and simultaneously attempting to outdo the United States and regain a sense of respect and purpose, or perhaps, approval.



1.4. General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito, 1945  
Photographer Unknown, from a collection of original print copies owned by R. Young  
Image courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum

Murakami staged his acclaimed group exhibition, the third and final installment of the *Super Flat* trilogy, *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, at The Japan Society in New York in 2005. Sponsored by Microsoft, the theme of the exhibition is a reference to the postwar big brother/little brother relationship between the United States and Japan, as well as having the more apparent reference to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, nicknamed "Little Boy." There is no escape from political overtones in Murakami's presentation, particularly with the incorporation of a copy of Article Nine of the constitution implemented by the Japanese government after its surrender to the American army in World War II. The group exhibition is an uninhibited *mélange* of Japanese heritage and repressed imagination, filled with violent and sexualized images, child-like figures wielding weapons

and post-apocalyptic visions of the future. Murakami believes everything can be a

"subculture" in Japan and remarks on the presentation of the exhibition in New York:

From the American perspective this whole package I've brought over to New York in this exhibition is perceived and understood as 'subculture' -- Hello Kitty, Doraemon. But in Japanese society there's no distinction between subculture and mainstream cultures. The high / low dichotomy is distinctively Western. (Nakamura, R. 2005, n.p.)

The exhibition presents examples of the artists' postcolonial subversion, and by doing so, Matsui argues that Murakami practices a cultural genealogy that "endows him with a postcolonial pride." (in Fogle 2001, 52).

*Little Boy* also featured Murakami's own work, *Time Bokan*, which is discussed later in this chapter, and Chiho Aoshima's *Magma Spirit Explodes, Tsunami is Dreadful*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two alongside other Kaikai Kiki artists. The anime and manga-influenced art empathizes with and then violently corrupts, even demonizes, the false innocence of modern society. Daniel Etherington of the BBC says of Murakami, "There's an apocalyptic, religious dimension to the deceptively innocent cartoon psychedelics." (2003). This paradox is crucial to the analysis of Superflat, as Americanization and traditionally dominant Eurocentric art establishments are imbedded in the work, yet directly conflict with it. Murakami has stated, "Superflatness is an original concept of the Japanese, who have been completely westernized." (2000, 5). Thus, Murakami indicates that the inauthenticity of Japanese contemporary society is what makes it unique.

### **1.3. The Development of DOB**

Debates on the authenticity, originality and identity in the construction of Japanese art have re-emerged since the Meiji period and Japan's importation of *bijutsu*, the Western concept of fine art. The origins of *bijutsu* are linked with the contemporary Japanese artist's

experience of "looking outward and returning to the domestic." (Matsui 2001a, 47) Part of Japan's modernisation was the subsequent social and political resistance, which included an interest in reasserting a Japanese identity in the arts. The investigation of Japanese identity, its definition and its uniqueness is the subject of research across various disciplines in the humanities. John Nathan, the Takashima Professor of Japanese Cultural Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara, sought to identify and answer questions of Japanese identity:

What does it mean to be Japanese? What are the source and nature of Japan's uniqueness? The continuing absence of satisfactory answers to these pressing questions has brought to the surface once again a national uneasiness that many Japanese experience today as a sense that something fundamental is missing from their lives. (Nathan 2004, 19)

Contemporary Japanese art is often connected with the socio-psychological problem of Japanese post-war identity. Since the traumatic end of World War II, what some would call "Japan's slavish emulation of the West" is associated with a sense of emptiness and anxiety, resulting from a civilization said to be "externally motivated" (as opposed to an "internally motivated" Western civilization). (Nathan 2004, 11) According to the novelist Soseki Natsume<sup>12</sup> (1867-1916), something is "externally motivated" when it is forced to assume a certain form as the result of pressure applied from the outside. In his 1911 lecture, *The Civilisation of Modern-Day Japan*, Soseki described an imbalanced condition of society caused by western modernisation:

A nation, a people that incurs a civilisation this way, can only feel a sense of emptiness, of dissatisfaction and anxiety. There are those who gloat over this civilisation of ours as if it were internally motivated, but they are wrong. They may think they represent the height of fashion, like boys who make a great show of enjoying cigarettes before they even know what tobacco tastes like. This is what Japanese must do in order to survive, and this is what makes us so pitiful. (ibid.)

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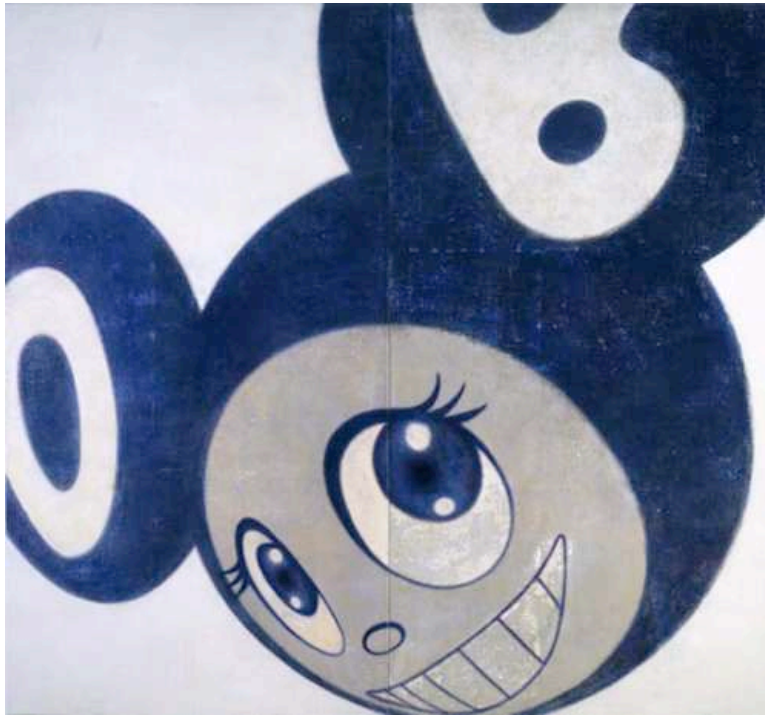
<sup>12</sup> Soseki Natsume was born in 1867 Kinnosuke Natsume in Edo (now Tokyo) and adopted the pen name Soseki at age 19, which replaced his given name.



Soseki wrote a novel in 1909, *And Then*, whose hero asserts that the struggle to assimilate Western influence without losing equilibrium would end when “feeble Japan could stand shoulder to shoulder with the greatest powers of Europe.” (Nathan 2004, 12). During World War II in 1945, thirty-five years after the publication of Soseki’s novel, the United States dropped “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, crushing Japan into immediate surrender. Like Soseki, Murakami was born during a historical moment when Japan's identity as a nation was ruptured, followed by a long period of Westernisation. It is this parallel that crystallises the poignant connection of their remarks regarding their own Japanese culture and links the title of Murakami’s 1994-1997 painting series, *And Then And Then And Then And Then And Then*, with Soseki's novel. Murakami's painting is a portrait of his Dob character with an exaggerated smile and ears reminiscent of Mickey Mouse. The title may allude to the early modern period by presenting the entire cycle of Japan’s uncertainty of self and longing for its own cultural identity again and again.

The struggle over cultural identity became most apparent in the decades following the traumatic end of World War II, and it continues today. For Murakami, there is a constant search for new ways to escape the anguish inherited from the previous generation. Matsui says, “The coexistence of the political and the playful in his artwork enables Murakami to reveal the emptiness at the core of contemporary Japanese youth culture.” (Matsui 2007, 34) Like many of his characters will do, Dob becomes a form of self-portrait, and, as he says, a portrait of the negative aspects of Japanese society. The character, Murakami explains, is a “self-portrait of the Japanese people (1999, 63). He is cute but has no meaning and understands nothing of life, sex, or reality.” (Lubow 2005). Dob is “deliberately cute and silly-looking,” and Murakami indicates that his own identity is embedded in this representation of “cute” and “silly” Japan, yet he remains critical of it. By presenting Dob as a self-portrait, Murakami indicates a sense of self-debasement, shame and even disgust

toward the lack of meaning and the perceived and internalised shallowness of Japan's culture of cuteness or superficiality.



1.5. *And Then, And Then And Then And Then And Then And Then (Blue)*, 1996  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
118 1/8" x 118 1/8"  
Collection of Queensland Art Gallery  
Courtesy of Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles

A mix of the Sega company's Sonic the Hedgehog and the popular anime character, Doraemon (the "cat-like robot from the future"), Dob's broad toothy grin and large circular ears also reference the Western cartoon world with his close stylistic ties to Disney's Mickey Mouse. When looking at Dob from the front, the letter D is formed by the lines on the left ear, and the letter B appears on the right ear. Dob's circular face is an O-shape, thus making his name legible in the character's image and giving the character qualities of a logo. Dob's name is derived from the famous Japanese gag "Dobojite dobojite" (a form of wordplay using the Japanese expression, "Dooshite! Dooshite!" which loosely translates to "Why? Why?") from the comic book Inakappe Taisho and "oshamanbe," a catchphrase by Yuri Toru (1921-1999), a comedic actor. (Yoshitake 2007a, 1) The nonsensical gag phrase "dobozite

dobozite oshamanbe" can also be found in early 1970s Japanese manga. (Tachiki 2004, 57) First conceived in Murakami's work as his 1993 sign piece, only those under the age of thirty could understand the "meaning" of the phrase. (Tachiki 2004, 57) Murakami later condensed the phrase into the three-letters, DOB, to formulate his first character, which was meant to become his trademark.

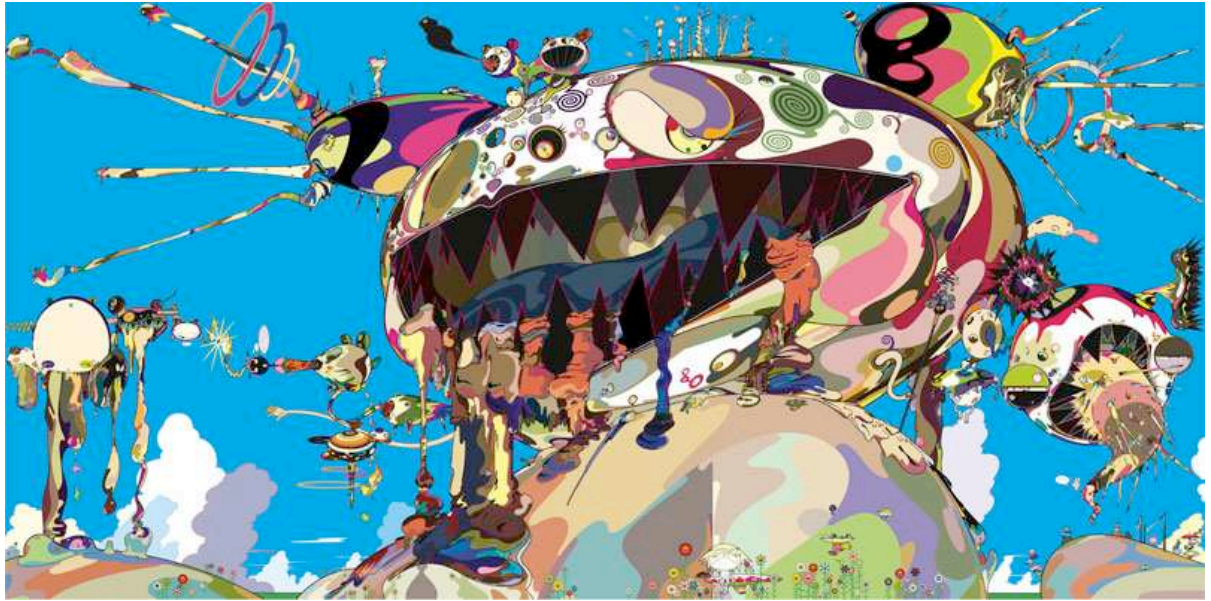
Murakami's initial intention in creating the Dob character was to design an image that was "originally Japanese", although he subsequently acknowledged that the use of promotional characters originated in the U.S. (Cruz 1999, 16) Murakami's construction of Dob presents one of the central issues of this thesis: Japanese identity is a complex system of imported Western views and the exported images chosen by the Japanese to present to the West. As mentioned previously, in the eyes of many westerners, Dob instantly resembles Disney's Mickey Mouse with the familiar circular ears. The cartoons of Disney were certainly present in Japan throughout the twentieth century. Even Japan's most famous postwar manga artist, Osamu Tezuka, initially looked at Disney characters and is often referred to as the "Walt Disney of Japan" or "Disney of the East." Importantly, however, Dob is also a product of the trauma of World War II and the American occupation of Japan, and "we must not forget that this desire for the birth of new characters has grown out of this trauma." (Murakami 2000, 11)

Dob displays a range of emotional states, from cute and happy, to violent, aggressive, crazy, and even ill. In this way, Dob becomes a symbol for the creative potential in transformative processes. By offering a Japanese character with a range of physical and psychological states effected by the circumstances surrounding him, Dob exemplifies the complex dynamics at play in the Superflat world of production and consumption. In fact, although "flat," Murakami's Dob may have the competitive edge on Mickey Mouse in terms of depth.

In early works, such as *Dob in a Strange Forest* (1999), the Dob character appears sweet and innocent, approaching a colourful mushroom gathering. Later, and probably not coincidentally, along with Murakami's popularity and workload, the character evolves, perhaps corrupted by what he has encountered. Over the years, Dob is nothing short of monstrous; he has jagged teeth, he is vomiting, and we also see the recurring and now classic Murakami motif of multiple eyes, which, as he says, "see everything but understand nothing." (Murakami 2007b, n.p.) *Tan Tan Bo Puking (a.k.a. Gero Tan)* was created in 2002, within the first year of the formation of Murakami's commercial enterprise, Kaikai Kiki. As Dob is frequently understood to be Murakami's alter ego due to Murakami's own claims that Dob is a self portrait, it is interesting to witness the transformation of the character into a completely new one with a (not so cute) new name. He has consumed and regurgitated; there are other creatures feeding from his excretions. It is a scene of graphic violence, the very crossover between life and death, during which the character has sprouted eyes that cannot seem to focus, and we are no longer able to locate his gaze. With his many faces and transformations, Dob is a model of the paradoxical character behind any attempt at describing what it means to be Japanese and also brings into question, lightheartedly, the necessity or significance of art itself:

Where is the source of truly necessary concepts? The more one earnestly searches for this, the more one seems to lose his grip on his absurd and fantastic efforts. And all that remains is the conclusion that everything has no meaning.

An art historical linkage is also implicated in the willingness to revisit the past, a symptom of postmodernism, as opposed to the anti-traditional arguments of the avant-garde and the modern period.



1.6. *Tan Tan Bo Puking - a.k.a. Gero Tan*, 2002  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
Four panels: 141 3/4" x 283 7/16" x 2 5/8"  
Collection of Amalia Dayan and Adam Lindemann



1.7. *Dob in a Strange Forest*, 1999  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic, fiberglass and iron  
Approx. 3' x 9' x 9'  
Installation at Parco Gallery, Tokyo

Murakami's Dob character also appears in the large (15'L x 10'H) painting, 727, which featured prominently in all four locations of the ©MURAKAMI retrospective exhibition organised by curator Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The exhibition's itinerary included The Brooklyn Museum in New York, The Museum für Modern Kunst in Frankfurt and The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao over a two-year period from 2007-2009 and will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four. 727 appears on the cover of the three hundred and twenty-seven page catalogue, which contains essays by Dick Hebdige, Midori Matsui, Scott Rothkopf and Mika Yoshitake. The Dob character in 727 has a sinister smile of shark-like teeth and five visible red eyes. At first look, the curling lines that engulf him resemble a wave, recalling the famous *Great Wave* presented by one of the most recognised Japanese artists of all time, Katsushika Hokusai (1761-1849), and his 36 *Views of Mt. Fuji*. It is useful to point out here that the Japanese works referenced in the *Superflat* exhibition are held in Western collections, including Hokusai's *Great Wave* of the 36 *view of Mt Fuji* series. This enables Murakami to call upon the Japanese identity of the works whilst also manipulating the familiarity of the visual references for Western audiences. At the same time, Western art historical references are made by the accompanying text in the exhibition catalogue, which enables his work to be categorised in relation to Western art discourses. (Darling 2001; Minami 2001) Paul Schimmel writes in his ©MURAKAMI catalogue essay that "727 owes another debt to American art" (2007, 73) and links the surface texture to that of Warhol's *Oxidation* series from 1978. 727, however, was created by laboriously applying and then sanding away layer upon layer of paint to the canvas, a process that evokes techniques of nihonga. Murakami's swirling black lines actually form a cloud through which Dob is floating (or flying), and the main source for the painting is the early-Edo period painting by Sōtatsu Tawaraya, *Wind God and Thunder God*, which bears a similar composition and depth created with ink on gold leaf. (Kataoka 2008, n.p.)





1.8. 727-727, 2006  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
Three panels: 118 1/8" x 177 3/16" x 2 3/4"  
The Stephen A. Cohen Collection  
Courtesy of Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles



1.9. *Wind God and the Thunder God*, Edo period (date unknown)  
Sōtatsu Tawaraya  
Pair of two-fold screens, ink and colour on gold paper  
164.5 x 182.4cm  
Kyoto National Museum

While both *And then and then and then and then and then and then* and 727 are painted in the nihonga style, Murakami's deployment of nihonga methods has contemporary political implications. Although nihonga can be defined as a traditional and authentic Japanese painting form, Matsui argues that nihonga consciously reacted to the westernization of Japan by actually creating a new political identity, which Murakami's practice reinvigorates in the current context. (Matsui 2001, 53)

#### **1.4. 'Cool Japan' and Neo-Pop**

Unfortunately, I can never give "Japan" a fixed shape. I cannot meet my real "self." Nor can I discern what "art" really is. (Murakami 2000, 9)

The use of the numbers, 727, which commonly refers to a passenger jet plane, as the title of Murakami's large triptych of 1996, may invoke associations with America's air raids in Japan. The title of 727 is not the first instance in which Murakami has used the airplane theme; the monumental sculptural figure, "Miss Koko," as *The Second Mission Project*, transforms into a fighter jet. The transformative abilities of *Miss Ko2* are a form of power. Although Murakami's hypersexual anime-inspired figure may look, to some, like nothing more than oversized and fetishized versions of a children's toy, he could also be considered a sophisticated social observer and surveyor of today's transcultural hybridity.





1.10. *Second Mission Project, Miss Ko2*, 1999  
Takashi Murakami  
Installation view at Wonder Festival (2000)  
Oil paint, acrylic, synthetic resins, fiberglass and iron  
2244 x 1769 x 1315 mm.  
Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Koons can be considered the American ambassador of 1980s Neo-Pop art and Murakami his Japanese counterpart, as identified by Noi Sawaragi, who coined the term "Japanese Neo Pop", or JNP, in the Japanese art journal *Bijutsu Techô* in March 1992. (Mōri 2006, 189) Japanese Neo Pop is unique in Japan because it is the first movement that openly incorporates subculture and popular cultures in art practice. (ibid., 176) Japanese Neo Pop artists are different from American Pop artists as they are not only informed by popular culture, but also by war images combined with their imaginary experiences of war and nuclear annihilation. Sawaragi argues that although war images have been repressed, the memory has survived in the form of subcultural imagination. Thus, Sawaragi, like Murakami, reconstructs a lineage in Japanese art by incorporating this idea of "subcultural imagination" with pop culture imagery and the condition of postwar Japan:

Post-war Japanese repeatedly experienced, more or less, 'the world's end' and 'the ruins/ruins of fire' through pop culture such as TV programs, films, comics and animations; *Godzilla* being awakened by radioactivity after a long sleep, destroys Tokyo; *Spaceship Yamamoto* tries to save the earth which is dying from radiation; The Metropolis is

devastated in 'Psychic Wars' in *AKIRA*; Children are forced to join commandoes as a 'student mobilisation' in the war against unidentified 'apostles' in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. We have seen that Tokyo and Japan have been destroyed many times and experienced cruel wars with heroes who try to survive in the 'subcultural imagination.'  
(Sawaragi 2002, 388)

Koons used the American cartoons, *Popeye* and *Hulk*, as the subject of his work, which, like *Miss Ko2*, are self-transforming figures, perhaps suggesting that the artist has the ability to harness and manipulate the self and the image presented to the audience. (Von Hantelmann 2009, 52) Koons also views his series as a representation of elements from the East and West and explains, "*Hulk Elvis* represents for me both Western and Eastern culture, a sense of a guardian, a protector, that at the same time is capable of bringing the house down."<sup>13</sup> Murakami also views his "Kaikai" and "Kiki" characters as his "spiritual guardians" (Yoshitake 2007b, n.p.), indicating another alignment in the two artists' sensibilities in their use of characters.



1.11. *Triple Hulk Elvis I*, 2007  
Jeff Koons  
Oil on canvas  
102"H x 138"W  
Collection of William J. Bell

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<sup>13</sup> Jeff Koons quoted in Press Release for exhibition, *Hulk Elvis*, 1 June – 27 July 2007, Gagosian Gallery, London.

In the 1980s, Koons was considered by critics and institutions to be one of the "Neo Geo" artists, although he never declared himself to be within the group as an artist. He has, however, been more apt to commit to the Neo Pop label, even though he has continually denied and claims that it is a mistake to think that his work is about consumerism:

I think there is a misunderstanding about my work that it's about product and consumerism. Somebody recently came to me and asked if I could design a bookstore, but that's not for me. I never did anything to create this other persona, even in the bodies of work that dealt with luxury and degradation where I warned people not to pursue luxury because it was like the alcoholic falling under the control of alcohol. It's confusing the messenger with the message. (Koons in Ward 2009, n.p.)

Murakami is similarly faced with the presumption that his work is about consumerism, which is more likely to be a result of monetary success rather than actual content and subject matter of the work. When asked about any potential rivalry with the success of Murakami (and that of Damien Hirst), Koons again chose to differentiate himself from associations with a movement or group:

I enjoy showing with artists from my generation but I'm not involved in trying to create some branded type of product, because I believe you penetrate the consciousness through the idea more than with distribution. (in Ward 2009, n.p.)

Murakami, however, indicates that Koons provides a benchmark of success to which he strives and complains, "I couldn't get money very well, compared with Damien [Hirst] and Jeff [Koons]." (in Lisica Appendix 2010)

Murakami and Koons also seem to share a democratic point of view when it comes to the dissemination of their work, and Koons has said of his own work that he is "always trying to create work that doesn't make viewers feel they're being spoken down to, so that they feel open participation." (in Siegel, 2003a) Both Murakami and Koons claim that their artwork reaches a broad range of audiences, indiscriminating against social class or level of knowledge of the history of art. However, while Murakami embraces the copyright symbol

and makes merchandise from his own company, Koons disputes charges of commercial motivation associated with a brand, while still maintaining his artist-celebrity persona.

Koons' vacuum cleaners from "The New" series were placed in a framework of futuristic nuclear annihilation in the 1983 exhibition *Science Fiction* held at the Weber Gallery in New York, curated by Peter Halley. (Pearlman 2003, 113) The presentation included weaponry and lights, creating a high-tech and militaristic sensibility throughout. In Koons' *Luxury and Degradation* exhibition, the artist's surface is "very much a false front for an underlying degradation." (Koons in Muthesius 1992, 74) Murakami's superflat surface also hides a form of degradation, that of Japanese society and the identity of a nation, and, like Koons, Murakami is equally as controversial as he is successful. They are both often charged with lacking critique, yet neither lacks an agenda. Without presenting critique, however, the implication from critics is superficiality and shallowness. This accusatory position, however, misses the ambitious nature of the work, which challenges the bourgeois establishment of what art should resemble, while also inviting projection from the viewer, and even fetishisation. (Von Hantelmann 2009, 49)

Although often stated that Koons' work is about consumerism, Koons has tended to deny this view. Unlike Murakami, Koons tries to play down his commercial success, while maintaining that his ideas are the driving force behind his work, saying, "Making money is not my intention. I want to make powerful work." (in Teeman 2009, n.p.) Koons' public persona, however, including his series with Italian porn star and politician, Ilona Staller, known as La Cicciolina, where he presented sculptures and photographs of their love-making in graphic, passionate detail, could be considered as a method of image-marketing that bares similarities with Murakami's approach to his own exposure as a personality. One important difference in Koons' *Made in Heaven* series is the indication suggested by critics and viewers that it is an exploitation of Ilona Staller and their marriage.

Koons also created editions of his giant *Balloon Dog* sculpture as limited edition miniatures mounted on reflective silver dinner plates, which were sold at contemporary museum shops around the globe. Koons' attempt at maintaining a distance between the two artists' methods seems miniscule when examining Koons' *Balloon Dog* presentations. Murakami's collectible miniatures, the *SUPERFLATMUSEUM* collection, which were distributed in galleries around the world, as well as via toy confectionary dispensers in Tokyo, were the subject of a great deal of critical disapproval and will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

### **1.5. Sex Sells: The Hiropon Sculpture and Otaku Subculture**

Among Murakami's most shocking and memorable signature works is *Hiropon* (Figure 1.12), a seven-foot-tall fiberglass sculpture of an anime woman-child with extremely exaggerated features of huge green eyes, two bright blue ponytails, a tiny, smiling mouth and tremendous breasts. She squeezes and holds her extruding pink nipples that form the handles of a jump rope made up of a thick stream of squirting breast milk. The overall effect, and particularly in *Hiropon's* bright-eyed facial features and playful expression, employs elements of cuteness, known as *kawaii*. Initially associated with childish behaviour, *kawaii* has become a cultural phenomenon in Japan, and it is now an aesthetic that has infiltrated pop music, fashion, anime and manga. The term first appeared in Japanese dictionaries in the 1970s and, in the popular sense, translates to "cute" while also denoting ideas of vulnerability, beauty, and even social or sexual inexperience. The term has become widely used in Japan and is often considered a compliment even for adults who exhibit a certain style or attitude.

Kinsella attributes the adult “regressive” infatuation as an attempt at achieving independence and freedom.<sup>14</sup> For Kinsella, this social trend demonstrates a “soft rebellion” by youths who rejected expected social roles in the family, workplace and society in general. (1995) To embrace *kawaii* was to maintain childhood freedom and refuse to perform the prescribed duties since the immediate post-war period of supporting economy and the nation as a whole. Cuteness, as a social construction, can be disarming, and to call something (or someone) cute suggests harmlessness and lacking profundity. The wide-eyed cuteness of manga and anime characters projects the cute kind of innocence that is usually irresistible to adults, which can also make children want to rebel against it, as in Nara’s *Damn it all* (Figure 1.3).

Not only has the quality of cuteness become a cultural phenomenon, it is an effective vehicle for girls as a social construction, and, in the case of *Hiropon*, it is also a strategy for Superflat artists. Murakami explains, “In Japan, communication is about appearances and surfaces. We use cuteness and formality to disguise what we really want to say. My work looks at the other side of that cuteness.” (Gomez 1999, 33)

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<sup>14</sup> Numerous cultural ethnographers, anthropologists and theorists have studied the importance of *kawaii* in late 20th century Japan, including Hiroshi Aoyagi, Ōtsuka Eiji and Sharon Kinsella, among many others.



1.12. *Hiropo*, 1997  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic, fiberglass, iron  
71" x 41" x 48"  
Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles

This “other side”, a dangerous or demonic cuteness, can be seen in Nara’s *Damn it all* (Figure 1.3), Murakami’s *Tan Tan Bo Puking* (Figure 1.6) and the two characters that make up Murakami’s company name, “Kaikai” and “Kiki.” Kiki is pink and initially seems to be non-threatening, with an open smiling mouth, three vacuous-looking eyes that seem to roll lazily upwards, yet the figure also has fangs. Kaikai has the less-disturbing characteristics of just one set of eyes and symmetrical ears, yet one might conjure a feeling of uneasiness with the cleverness and awareness that comes with the Kaikai character’s implied ability toward sensory control and focus of vision. This kind of cuteness with a seemingly dual personality of violence and innocence, sexuality and childishness, is often found in Japanese manga and anime. The combination of cuteness and danger also has a neutralising effect, and this could be construed as a form of “cultural odourlessness” (*mukokuseki*), described by Koichi



Iwabuchi as a lack of cultural specificity in Japanese exported products. (Hjorth 2005, 46)

Iwabuchi argues that Japanese products, such as manga, become universally appealing because they have lost what makes them Japanese.

For Americans and Westerners, however, sex is a subject only to be dealt with by adults, while, according to Murakami, "Sex in Japan is for people under twenty-five. People over twenty-five tend to hide their sexuality. They are not doing it that much anyway." Perhaps this explains the accompanying warnings in some American and European museums where *Hiropon* has been exhibited, as well as the angry parents' remarks when they have been lured in by promises of colourful cartoon imagery, then subsequently confronted with naked sex parts. One parent blogs in the New York Times online "Complaint Box":

A Takashi Murakami show at the Brooklyn Museum in 2008 was a major draw for parents and kids. The first piece on display, a teaser in the museum's lobby, was a playful sculpture of cartoonlike characters, which made my sons want to see more. So it came as a shock when, entering the main exhibition space, we were greeted by a masturbating cowboy spinning a lasso of his semen. (Bernstein 2009, n.p.)

Ironically, Murakami has named Steven Spielberg as an important influence, and notices that, in his films, there is always some form of tension between the children and adults, who seem to live in separate worlds. On the contrary, he points out that in Japanese animation, "there is none -- everybody looks like a child." (in Pagel 2001, 192) That tension to which he refers, and the strangeness of using a childlike vehicle for adult concerns, becomes explicit with the *Hiropon* sculpture. It is virtually impossible to ignore her intense sexuality. *Hiropon* represents a volatile image of the cute young girl, who embodies the allure of innocent femininity to invite both playfulness and sexual desire, creating an ironic ambiguity situated around innocence, sex and media images. In Japanese, "hiropon" is a slang term used to refer to heroin or methamphetamine, which also indicates that there is a more dangerous side to her initial appeal. *Hiropon* and *Second Mission Project - Miss Ko2* both present sexuality as a menace within, a hypersexual and powerful eroticism lying



underneath the innocent exterior of a young girl whose big, bright, blank stare almost seems to warn the viewer, "Don't come too close..."



1.13. *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1998  
Takashi Murakami  
FRP resin, fiberglass, steel tubing, steel plate, and oil and acrylic paint  
90" x 57" x 43"  
Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles

Murakami's cast-iron companion piece to *Hiropon* in 1998, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, as referred to by the angry blogger above, is a smiling nude boy with spiky blue hair, frozen in the act of masturbation. While one hand holds his long, erect penis, the other hand effortlessly twirls a jet stream of semen like a lasso above him, bringing out the latent sexuality in a strongly manifest way. In contrast to the earlier *Hiropon*, *My Lonesome Cowboy* is not based on *otaku* desire, but on Murakami's reality of the United States, with an obvious nod, albeit coincidental on this occasion, to Warhol and his 1967 film, *Lonesome Cowboys*. The "My" in *My Lonesome Cowboy*, Murakami attributes, "is my reality about

America.” (2000, 29). The “Cowboy” idea comes from a novel called *Final Fantasy* by Yoshio Kataoka about a truck driver traveling across America. In addition, the face of *My Lonesome Cowboy* is a familiar one to viewers of Murakami's and slightly younger generations, as it is modeled after a character in the popular Sega video game of the same title, *Final Fantasy*, which was widely distributed and very popular outside of Japan at the start of the 1990s. The hair is probably derived from the equally popular animated television series, *Dragonball Z*.

Another source, perhaps having to do with “Lonesome,” is Kirby Dick’s film, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*,<sup>15</sup> in which Flanagan hammers a nail into his own penis, with bloody, and undeniably painful results, as he cracks jokes. Flanagan’s use of the prefix “Super” in the term *Supermasochist* in the 1980s is also an interesting parallel to Murakami’s use of *Super* in the term *Superflat* today, as both artists are the first to coin these terms and use them to describe their art practices. The highly endowed man is also a common image in early manga, and consequently, since Bob Flanagan’s death and the release of *Sick* in 1996, Sheree Rose, his lover/partner/dominatrix, has exhibited a twenty-foot high inflatable figure of Bob Flanagan, complete with a four-foot erection, in, of all places, Tokyo.

*My Lonesome Cowboy* and *Hiropon* present desire, made literal, in the production of a commodity. The nature of desire is portrayed as distorted through exaggeration, and stylized with bodily fluids that form a lasso and a rope. The characters become entangled with social and sexual desire extending past the limited realm of the otaku, to be consumed by the art market. Murakami created *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* to gain international notice, and his attention-seeking strategy was successful, as the two sculptures are his most talked-about pieces:

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Sargeant, notes on Kirby Dick, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan*, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/videocat/more/sick/flanagan.html>.

Because making a life-size figure is really no different than making a sex doll (a dutch wife) in the context of the anime figure. It's safe to say ours was a fairly shameless plan from the start. But for me, aside from what one might think in that context, we were making a kind of human sculpture new to the history of art, and its reality within the otaku world was something that only occurred to me a while after the project was underway. (Murakami 2001b, 138)

Murakami also says of his sculptural works, "Considering what is an icon now, I think of a 3-D animation figure." (Wakasa 2000) When viewed as cultural icons, *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* serve a rather different purpose than do their cute little anime figurine sources and may also recall Jeff Koons' explorations of iconography, mirroring of media culture, robot-like sterilization and pornographic fascination with sex and desire.

The exploitation of innocence was also employed by Koons in the 1980s. The references to childhood innocence can be seen in Koons' *Pink Panther* of 1986. The sculpture bares similarities in both physical presentation and subject matter to Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* and *Hiropon*, with reference to the popular American cartoon from Koons' own childhood. The female figure in *Pink Panther* also displays exaggerated and stereotypically Western pornographic features of luscious lips, long blond hair and large breasts. It goes without saying that *My Lonesome Cowboy* is in the act of masturbation, and Koons describes a mixing of childhood play and sexual desire:

Pink Panther is about masturbation. I don't know what she would be doing with the Pink Panther other than taking it home to masturbate with. (Koons in Caldwell 1992, 113)



1.14. *Pink Panther*, 1998

Jeff Koons

Porcelain

41" x 20 1/2" x 19"

MOMA Collection (fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser)

In East Asia outside of Japan, especially in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea, it can be observed that the youth are generally more knowledgeable than Western youth about the Japanese domestic context. The popularity of anime and manga products in the United States and Europe is based only on the images, or, the represented cultural product. Although manga and anime history are connected to Edo by Superflat, and Murakami introduced the term "otaku" to his American audiences, otaku should not be regarded as synonymous with manga culture. In his publication *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*,<sup>16</sup> Azuma explains the discord between the otaku and Murakami. With Murakami lacking the "database" of elements of a "true" otaku, his projects such as *Second Mission Project*, *Miss Ko2* are seen as a failure by the otaku community, even by those otaku-producers who were commissioned to

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<sup>16</sup> Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* text was originally published in Japanese in 2001. The text was not translated into English until 2009, and therefore the relevance to Murakami's artwork has diminished. Murakami's "Poku" idea has since been abandoned, and, by 2009, "superflat" had become and remained the buzz word for several years.

produce the sculpture. (Azuma 2009, 63-66) Azuma also believes that this is what makes Murakami's otaku-design projects important. *SMPKo2* was rejected when originally presented at the otaku "Wonder Festival," an element to the character that only serves to add to her allure as an artwork in Murakami's oeuvre. Murakami is aware of how radical they seem to the "outside" world, even though, in the otaku world, they are simply borrowed designs that seemingly miss the point.

Art and otaku culture are like oil and water, in the sense that they can't really mix. My vision of pop culture was originally as follows: this culture could only develop because it had a certain financial wealth based on the extraordinary expansion of the capitalist economy. But this was not the case for the otaku culture. Even someone fairly poor can enjoy it. I coined the term *poku* in an attempt to blend the oil and water, but it didn't work, and when I later coined the term *superflat*, the term *poku* disappeared completely. The term *superflat* evokes more compression of art and *otaku* than a fusion of these elements" (Murakami in Kelmachter revised 2002, 4)

The subculture emerged in the 1970s, and the word "otaku" has been mostly understood in Japan as derogatory, though it has a more positive connotation in the United States among manga fans. Therefore, it could be argued that its international definition is somewhat of a desirable label for young consumers of manga, taking on the positive elements of the "Cool Japan" phenomenon. Murakami's promotion of the term could probably be credited with having some effect on the imported usage and the more positive variation in the meaning of otaku in the West. Azuma argues that otaku can be understood through the history of postmodernism and that the otaku are not only a contemporary Japanese cultural phenomenon, but representative of a new type of consumer in the postmodern information era (2009). Furthermore, Azuma argues that the cultural framework, including internal debates and those within the otaku community, does not translate or carry over to receive attention in the West. (2005, n.p.) These debates are a critical element in regarding the otaku as a "culture" rather than simply as an industry. The global representation of Japaneseness and the thought of the Japanese government regarding manga as an official cultural product

go against the otaku's anti-establishment foundations, causing the otaku to lose their status as a subculture, and ultimately, lose their identity, as their anti-social behaviour becomes not only acceptable, but encouraged. The lack of understanding or sharing the inherently Japanese or Asian elements, however, does not prevent the cultural products from infiltrating Western imaginations.

Although the scope of this thesis does not include a thorough history of *Japonisme*,<sup>17</sup> it should be acknowledged that there are some remarkable similarities between the more recent "Cool Japan" boom in the West and the popularity of Japanese cultural products and artworks in late nineteenth century Europe. The European craze for buying Japanese prints was also shared by Americans in France, who sought to acquire taste from Europe. (Lambourne 2005, 175) Although there are certainly similarities between *Japonisme* and the Orientalism of the nineteenth century and the 1990s "Cool Japan" phenomenon, there are also striking differences in the current "techno-Orientalist" (Hjorth 2005, 47) Western view of Japanese aesthetics versus the previous Orientalist view that the Japanese had attained a higher level of sophistication, demonstrated by the American Impressionist and friend of Claude Monet, Theodore Robinson (1852-1896):

My Japanese print points in a direction that I must try and take, an aim for refinement and a kind of precision seen in the best old as well as modern work.<sup>18</sup> (Lambourne 2005, 175)

This Western concept of Japanese art and the narrative of Japanese art history took form when the Japanese government published a book (in French) on the occasion of the Paris International Exhibition in 1900. Later, the text was translated into Japanese to become the canon of Japanese art. The Japanese works collected and displayed in American museums in the twentieth century were those appearing in Japanese studies, and conditioned by Japanese national policy, and thus were selected exports, which initiated the American concept of

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<sup>17</sup> For further reading on *Japonisme*, see Lambourne and Watanabe.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson was referring to Hiroshige's *Fireworks over the Ryōgoku Bridge, One Hundred Views of Edo* (1849-50).

Japanese art. (Nakashima 2006, 246) Azuma also relates the current, renewed Orientalism to the "Cool Japan" boom:

There exists a kind of Orientalism, especially in Europe and the US, in their perspective towards Japanese pop culture. They consume images, but what is behind the image, such as ideologies, discourses and histories, are completely erased when they are exported overseas. Some otaku in Japan accept this reality cynically and believe that it all amounts to money-making, so the message becomes, 'just export more!' But there are also people who are increasingly frustrated by these attitudes and say, 'No matter how much context and meaning we produce, only the images circulate. We are making more money, but is this what we want? This is meaningless.' Having seen this, Japanese pop culture has become a product to be consumed globally, and it makes those who deal with money very happy. But it also creates a feeling of great ambivalence among creators. (2005, n.p.)

When considering Murakami's Superflat theory in the framework of continued Orientalism and the global consumption of Japanese popular culture, it seems that Murakami not only acknowledges the absence of history, but also encourages the idea of eliminating it, to produce new meaning (that of meaninglessness) in the reception of his work in the West. This kind of historicism that reconnects the individual with the present state of his own society, is identified by Laroui as "instrumental" in the future of postcolonial studies:

The historicism we are leading up to, one that is in many respects instrumental, is not the passive acceptance of one's own national past; rather, it is the voluntary choice of realizing the unity of historical meaning by the reappropriation of a selective past. This choice is motivated by pragmatic considerations, perhaps, by modesty, above all by nationalism in the most natural sense of the word; the will to gain the respect of others by the shortest possible route. (Laroui, quoted in Dirlik 1999, 169)

By presenting otaku as a key element of his work, and although the otaku disagree with Murakami's representation of their culture, Azuma believes that Murakami is purposefully deceiving the West in an effort to improve the state and reputation of otaku culture within Japan. (Azuma 2005, n.p.) Azuma's view places Murakami in a position to raise the status of this previously marginalized subculture. Murakami's use of the word

"otaku" to describe his work is another one of his critical strategies to provoke change within Japan via the exportation and subsequent re-importation of Japanese cultural products.

The current Western obsession with Japanese cultural products has gone beyond the initial attraction to the exotic and extends into engagement with individuals "living in transnational times," and those individuals, such as Murakami, are participating in the international scene. (Kataoka 2004, 9) Furthermore, international symbols of Japan have moved away from the previous images of Buddhist statues and ukiyo-e prints and have now become represented by popular and youth culture. Mami Kataoka, curator of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, claims that art in Japan has become more closely linked to consumer culture and mass production, and this is largely due to the international reputation of artists like Murakami and Nara. Fashion designers use such artistic strategies as limited editions, artists draw images for t-shirts, and the English word "art" has been incorporated into everyday Japanese language. (Kataoka 2004, 8)

### **1.6. The Memory of History: 'Time Bokan' and the Culture of Impotence**

With its mushroom cloud shape that also depicts a skeletal form, Murakami's *Time Bokan* series conjures up images of the mushroom clouds formed by the atomic bombs. The image takes on an anime-inspired postmodern representation of the traditional imagery of flowers and skulls, and the *Time Bokan* series of mushroom clouds can be seen to reference ukiyo-e traditions. Flowers and the enduring skull image in contemporary art will be discussed further in Chapters Two and Three. Murakami claims that the production of images like these are the most common way that young people now learn about the events of the atomic bombs and nuclear disaster. Information about the violence and destruction suffered by the Japanese as a result of their attempt to rise as a world military superpower is



presented in imaginative, but unsolvable (and kawaii-fied), presentations of cartoon heroes and animated explosions.



1.15. *Time Bokaan - Red*, 2001  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
70 7/8" x 70 7/8"  
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

The image in Murakami's *Time Bokaan* is based on a popular animated television series from the 1970s of the same title, which means "time machine." At the end of each episode, the inevitable conclusion is nuclear disaster in the form of the mushroom cloud form left in the wake of an atomic bomb, which symbolises the demise of the villains (only to reappear unscathed in the subsequent episodes). Murakami has made his skull-mushroom cloud brightly colored and inserted cute and colourful cartoon flowers in the eye sockets, which, despite their smiling faces, resemble the shape of funeral wreaths. The historical memory of the event of nuclear attack makes the bright colours and floral tributes appear less cute and instead sick, twisted and traumatic, while anxiety becomes a motif of Superflat art.

In an interview with Mako Wakasa in 2000, Murakami speaks of the inherent disadvantages presented by the supposed lack of concern for legitimate media presentation or knowledge about the threat of nuclear disaster:

I think the Tokaimura nuclear accident is one of the worst disasters after World War II. It was as harmful as Aum Cult's gas attack in Japan. The Japanese government suppressed the truth. I'm afraid many people will be dying because of the nuclear accident. I learned about the accident from the news in New York, although no Japanese newspapers carried it. I also read through the Internet. Most Japanese don't bother to get such information. Even if they do, they would not be galvanized into action because they don't believe that their action would affect any changes.

There is no doubt that the threat of nuclear disaster still exists today and is ingrained into Japanese culture, which Murakami identifies as Japan's culture of silence, or as he calls it, "impotence." Murakami discusses this "impotence" in an excerpt from his essay, *Impotence Culture - Anime*, in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2001:

Japan—a country weakened, made impotent in its defeat. The more *anime* has attempted an honest understanding of this impotence, the more ripples it has caused, and the more the *otaku* have been shunned within Japanese society. Neither the *otaku* nor the *otaku*-haters realize that these works are merely a form of self-portraiture. No, they actively don't want to realize it. (Fleming and Lubowsky Talbott 2001, 66.)

The previous statements not only link Murakami's work to his sympathy for the subculture of *otaku*, but they also serve to illustrate that Murakami's mushroom-themed work is representative of his continued efforts to propagate against Japan's so-called impotence via nuclear disaster and the victimisation culture caused by defeat, "so that the media feels guilty."

Superflat theory originally addressed the elimination of history, or excess layers of information, for a fresh start or a cultural do-over. With the *Time Bokan* series spanning back as long as Murakami's career, the mushroom cloud image has been repeated several times in

different color schemes, with the first one appearing in 1993 as a single black cloud form on a blood red background. Murakami describes the layered history of Superflat as a reconstruction of his Japanese identity, which was destroyed by the trauma of the war. Superflat art results from the Japanese experience of total annihilation, when "everything [was] flat after the atomic bomb." (Murakami, 2007, n.p.)

But what was my identity? So I felt that the only thing I could do, to explain that absence of identity; was to pile up all the formative layers that had contributed to my background... by showing how I had existed without any real identity, I would be able to start up something else. (quoted in Kelmachter 2002, 73)

Thus, Murakami's "original" cultural concept is not the same as a "pure" or completely authentic one that is uninformed by other cultures; rather, he identifies manga forms as a Japanese innovation while accepting the Western influence during modernisation, as well as the effects of American occupation on Japanese society. Murakami's unavoidable connection to the Meiji restoration in his idea of Superflat historical lineage is his use of nihonga techniques. Nihonga was an institutionalised style, and albeit "boring" in Murakami's hindsight, it is a product of the Meiji period that incorporated some Western approaches to traditional Japanese painting techniques. Simultaneously, Murakami keeps it alive, so to speak, by using those hybrid techniques in his work, such as 727-727.

By including the commercial forms of manga and anime, he constructs his own concept of "beauty" and "revival" of everyday aesthetic cultural value and seeks cultural authenticity in popular culture forms. By referring to his own lack of identity, he is really seeking to establish a Japanese foundation for art in Japan, while also acknowledging, but not privileging, Westernisation. Although one of the original criteria of Superflat art is that it has "no real history" (Murakami in Kaplan 2001, 97), even Murakami must conclude that "the new concept is: back to history," and the past is never forgotten.

## 2. SURVIVAL OF THE CUTEST: LOCATING THE EXOTIC

The Western world is very different when compared with Japan. Each country has a different culture, so basically what is accessible with my work depends on their understanding of Japanese comic culture... In Japan, my work is not exotic. That's why they don't like my work, because it is too general, too much manga stuff. Japanese people can see manga everyday, so that's why the reaction is very slow. But [in other countries], it's still a very unique image... that's why there's a very fresh and good reaction. People, anytime, want to get to the exotic. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

### 2.1. Low and High Perceptions from *ukiyo-e* to 'Micropop'

Chapter One situated Superflat within the context of a Westernised Japan since the end of World War II, with Murakami's generation born after the war and into an already twice-Westernised Japan. Their artwork represents a break away from the modernity of the twentieth century<sup>19</sup>, a continuation of Pop and postmodernism, and a new aesthetic for the twenty first century. Sawaragi sees the twenty-first century landscape as a superficial one:

In this field of transformation, such causes as interiority, beauty, faith, despair, history and criticism that maintained contemporary art in the twentieth century have now evaporated, replaced by the thin, flat, shallow reality." (in Turner 2004, 416)

By proposing Superflat as an aesthetic "borne from Japan" and distinct from Western art, Murakami reinforces the identity of Superflat art as the "other" to Western audiences.

However, this adaptation of the dichotomy may also be viewed as a subversive approach to its deconstruction. While Murakami acknowledges the characteristics of modernisation and globalisation in Superflat, he is able to reconstruct Japanese identity as a flexible model of hybridity and asserts this as a new identity, where assimilation is a skill characteristic of Japanese culture. He then presents the cultural difference as a unique commodity in the global art market, while simultaneously highlighting the occasions where cultural signifiers

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<sup>19</sup> The 1950s are considered an important period in twentieth century Japanese art, witnessing the emergence of the Gutai group and the postwar avant garde.

overlap. He is then able to re-import his identity as a successful artist in the West in order to strengthen his profile in Japan.

Chapter One also described the link between Superflat art and the pre-modern history of Japan's Edo period that Murakami suggests within his Superflat theory. The reception of Murakami's work, his solo exhibitions and his curatorial presentations in Europe and the United States have been facilitated by the visual connection and aesthetic familiarity with anime and manga as part of the new visual vocabulary of Japanese popular culture which infiltrated the West in the 1990s. This familiarity was developed both by the infiltration and fusions in cinema, television, games and comic culture, as well as the way that Superflat art was presented to the Western art market in blockbuster-style exhibitions that simultaneously corresponds with the structures of Western art and reinforced its own Japanese authenticity. Murakami then uses this injection of recognition in Western art markets to increase the profile of Superflat art in Japan as a new form of popular art for everyone. For Superflat artists, the popular culture forms of manga and anime possess the original and creative qualities that young people desire, and, in this way, they can also reconnect the low and high by finding relevance for the contemporary Japanese public, or, the consumer. In coining the Superflat term, Murakami defined a style and proposed a hybrid vision that diminished binaries of low and high art by including works of graphic designers, manga illustrators and artists on an equal playing field with no establishment of hierarchy. Instead, Murakami classifies all of these producers as "creators" and indicates that, in fact, all creators are "low level." He then re-establishes the high/low dichotomy by referring to a hierarchy within the broader system of the art world, with the "high" referring to intellectual and critical people, and the "low" as the artists/creators:

The artist just wants to make a painting, just wants to make something... there doesn't have to be a reason. It's a very primitive desire, and it happens suddenly. So, basically, the artist doesn't have to be thinking about anything. So, like, you know, that's why foolish

people make things. Critics are intellectual, and that is a very long distance [between critics and artists]... My world is very childish, because this world came from an artist. This world is very pure, but very childish and very low level. But this is ok, because I'm an artist, and I'm a low-level human being. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

Associating Superflat with Edo establishes a visual and aesthetic lineage of two-dimensionality in Japanese painting and reinforces the Japanese identity and authenticity of Superflat artists. Interestingly, it can be argued that Superflat history thereby reconnects Japanese art history to Western art by the interest in ukiyo-e<sup>20</sup> prints from European artists in the late nineteenth century. It is also useful to note that the appreciation of ukiyo-e prints was originally part of "low" culture. It was only later that these Edo forms were appreciated as and elevated to "high" art through admittance into the aesthetic canon of Japanese art history. Therefore, it is only with the suggested elimination of the low/high binary in the twentieth century, which exists in both East and West, that anime and manga can be considered as "art" by definition.

Although Murakami acknowledges that his Superflat sensibilities arise from Japan's process of Westernisation and postwar American occupation, he simultaneously asserts that the uniqueness of Superflat stems from Japaneseness. This historical overlap is what he sees as the "moment I fused those many windows into one." (Murakami 2000, 9) This fusion is also what he refers to as his "soy sauce" strategy:

Japanese contemporary art has a long history of trying to hide the soy sauce. Perhaps they will strengthen the flavor to please the foreign palette, or perhaps they'll simply throw the soy sauce out the window and unconditionally embrace the tastes of French or Italian cuisine, becoming Westerners whose model of contemporary art they follow... Though it may be easier that path is not for me, I think. No matter how much trouble it takes, I see the need to create a universal taste - a

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<sup>20</sup> "Ukiyo" is translated into English as "floating world" and in Japan connotes the world of earthly pleasure and decadence. The images from the woodblock prints became associated with nightlife and entertainment (i.e. kabuki and geisha) in cities such as Edo and Nagasaki in the Meiji period. Ukiyo-e ("pictures of the floating world") also depicted landscapes and nature, as well as beauty and eroticism, and the term's broader popular meaning is associated with enjoyment or pleasure, freedom and modernity.

common tongue - without cheating myself and my Japanese core... I continue to blend seasonings... I am vigilant in my search for their best points... However, at its core, my standard off 'beauty' is one cultivated by the Japan that has been my home since my birth in 1962. (Murakami 2001b, 130).

As stated in the introduction, Superflat history relies on the supposition that there were no hierarchical distinctions of aesthetic or utilitarian values between art and craft in pre-Meiji Japan. The incorporation of the Western concept of divisions came about during Japan's modernisation in the Meiji period. However, it must also be stated that it is a gross simplification to interpret Japan as having no concept of originality or as lacking any kind of cultural distinctions demarcating high and low elements. The variations and hierarchies do not follow the terms and conditions of art concepts in Western modernism, but cultural distinctions do occur.

Murakami contends that the Western distinction between high culture in the form of fine art, and low culture in the form of mass-produced commodities or popular culture is not recognised in the same way in Japan. The level of skill and technique required the individual touch, yet it did not exert the spiritual or conceptual meaning, or possess the aura, that art did. Craft was considered to be a product with a functional purpose, such as decoration. While this philosophical hierarchy was an invention of the West (see Shiner 2001) and has been challenged in the West, there has not been the same separation between art and craft, or art and the commercial, in Japan. Western divisions were incorporated in the East in the late 1800s through the twentieth century, and Superflat begins to erase them again. In Western art history, "craft" operated within the space between commercial product and art. Therefore, the contemporary challenges, such as Murakami's Superflat theory, are hybrid theoretical positions derived from Western philosophical debates, such as postmodernism, which also presume that expressions of art prior to Westernisation are more culturally authentic. (Kikuchi 2004)

Murakami acknowledges that fine art occupies a privileged position in Japan in regards to institutional practice; however, he argues that there is no connection for young consumers. He attributes this lack of relevance to the sense of betrayal felt since the Meiji period due to the "blind" following of academic and institutional practices of Western art. Despite Murakami's claim that the Superflat sensibility is uniquely Japanese, he also acknowledges that Superflat arises from Japan's Westernisation. The Japaneseness is reinforced by establishing a connection between contemporary manga and anime forms with the Edo period, as well as the flat aesthetic of traditional Japanese painting. While Murakami affirms the hybrid identity of contemporary Japan, he also asserts the hybridity as a characteristic that existed prior to the Meiji period and modernisation in Japan. He identifies the "DNA" of anime and manga as having been inherited from the Edo Eccentrics. (Murakami 2000b, 25) The Eccentrics also drew on the techniques of the West, while simultaneously rejecting them. (Tsuiji 1986, 63) The group is characterised by the spirit of freedom, individualism, innovation, strangeness and play with which Murakami finds kinship:

All of the "eccentric" artists shared a certain structural methodology, in which they created surface images that erased interstices and this made the observer aware of the images' extreme planarity. (Murakami 2000, 9)

Murakami's emphasis on the Japaneseness of Superflat highlights the potential problematic areas of contemporary globalisation generated by the commodification of cultural identity and cultural differences. At the same time, Superflat remains to be a flexible and open articulation of cultural identity as a hybrid form.

Throughout the twentieth century, nihonga practice has continued to be a symbol of Japanese national identity. Matsui argues that Murakami carefully separates his Superflat style from the representation of nihonga as a "false emblem" of Japanese national identity. (Matsui 1999, 23) Despite his nihonga training, Murakami does not claim that Superflat is borne of nihonga, nor does he present Superflat as a form of nihonga, however, he does



indicate that Superflat is uniquely Japanese as a visual art style and cultural phenomenon.

The implication is that Superflat is therefore part of ongoing discourses on Japanese national identity construction.

Many Western artists used formal aspects of ukiyo-e as a departure from the traditional concepts of the academy. They used planes of bright colours and flat backgrounds with less shadowing and more of a decorative style. (Westgeest 1996, 30-31) The images and techniques of ukiyo-e, or “pictures of the floating world,” were examined by Impressionists practicing *Japonisme* in late nineteenth-century Paris. Similar to the tradition of ukiyo-e, popular woodblock prints produced by nineteenth century artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige, the modern manga genre developed within Japanese popular culture. Although the relationship between ukiyo-e and manga is a historically specific and complex discussion outside the scope of this thesis, ukiyo-e can also serve as part of the stylistic lineage of manga-based Superflat art. Ukiyo-e prints share visual characteristics of dark outlines filled with flat colour planes comparable to anime and manga drawings.

Murakami connects the stylistic tendencies in paintings to Edo artists, and his Superflat lineage draws on Japanese art historian Nobuo Tsuji’s *Kisō no Keifu (Lineage of Eccentrics)* (1970). Tsuji identifies six Edo artists who produced “eccentric and fantastic images” (in Murakami 2000, 9) and indicates that there is a similar tendency towards eccentricity and playfulness in the contemporary forms of anime and manga. (Tsuji 1986; Murakami 2000) Eitoku Kanō used the term “kaikaikiki” to describe his work in the sixteenth century. (Yoshitake 2007b, n.p.) A member of the Eccentrics, Kano and this group of experimental artists were associated with play and entertainment, expressed resistance from the traditionalists and were supported by the urban, or commercial, population. The Eccentrics provide a useful starting point for Murakami's strategic development of the art historical lineage of Superflat.

Murakami presents his non-hierarchical consideration of art and popular culture as a reinvigoration of the Edo period before Meiji restoration, during which "art" did not exist as a separate category to craft, or everyday objects, and technical skill was valued more than "original" ideas and individual expression. The lineage from Edo is presented as a synthesis of forms between the Eccentrics of the Edo period with contemporary anime and manga art. The sensibilities demonstrated by the Eccentrics and Superflat artists reinforce planarity of service and encourage the viewer's flowing eye movement. This lineage is Murakami's model for the future and what he refers to as "Superflatness." The compositional structure of Superflat emphasises the two-dimensionality of the surface, while also making visible points of movement and tension, as can be experienced with animation, allowing the viewer to "to assemble an image in their minds from the fragments they gathered scanning the image." (Murakami 2000, 9)

The 2000 *Super Flat* exhibition included the work of graphic designers, fashion designers, and anime and manga artists, as well as works by Edo period artists Itō Jakuchū, Sansetsu Kanō and Shōhaku Soga. Murakami connects Superflat's manga and anime sources with the playfulness in the subject matter of these three Eccentrics of the Edo period, and he cites their ability to invoke a sense of flow with the viewer's eye movement. He then establishes a visual link between Superflat and the flat aesthetics of Japanese screen painting, thus indicating an alternative to the Western canon of art history, as well as a breakage from twentieth century *bijutsu*, the Meiji period term for the visual arts, referring to sculpture and painting. The history of the Edo Eccentrics provide a lineage of playfulness in authentic Japanese visual culture, which differentiates the Japanese canon from the history of *bijutsu* or Western art history.

The "DNA" of Superflat art is traced back to Edo period origins, and a historical lineage is established by connecting anime and manga to Edo paintings. As the imported

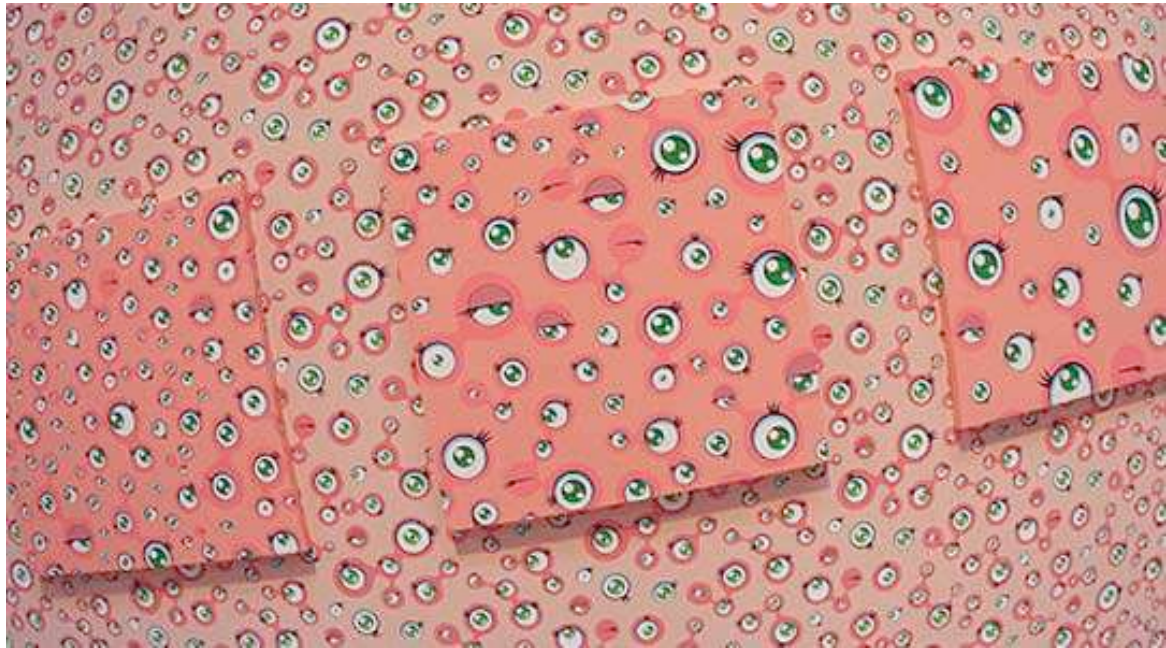
concept of art in the Western sense was introduced afterwards, during the Meiji period, Murakami is then able to use this lineage to re-present the history of art in Japan and affirm the “pure” Japaneseness and authenticity of Superflat. This strategy locates Superflat as both postmodern and a revival of the premodern, thus circumnavigating the modern period by identifying the experience of the second World War as the source of the Westernisation recognised in Superflat.

Stylistic characteristics of Murakami’s work refer to formal historical analysis, while maintaining the Superflat aesthetic. His manifestation of the multiplicity of points can be seen not only as a rejection of the one-point perspective, but also an alternative to the three-dimensional view, which is demonstrated by an alternative perspective created in two-dimensionality that simultaneously implies depth through unorthodox means. This multiple-points perspective is exemplified by a lack of fuzziness to background objects, thereby avoiding a camera's perspective, and acts as a diffusion resulting in multiple focal points:

The concept of superflat is based on a "multiplicity of points." By drawing a large number of eyes I disturb the perspective, or rather, I diversify it.  
(Murakami in Kelmachter, 5)

Murakami drives the idea even further with the appearance of multiple eyes as a recurring theme in his work. The viewer cannot view the work as a whole, coherent image, as the viewer’s eye moves about the field of disembodied eyes. This motif is at its most apparent with *Jellyfish Eyes* (Figure 2.1), which comes in the form of both paintings and wallpaper. In *Jellyfish Eyes*, all eyes are sharply in focus from the viewer’s perspective, outlined with perfectly formed black lines and scattered across the surface of the painting. The eyes appear inhuman, and perhaps monstrous. They are stylized in such a way that functions similarly as to how one views a digital screen, such as a computer, dividing the focus evenly throughout the field. There is no stable focal point, yet, using this analogy, there is an indication of virtual depth behind the eyes motif. In this way, Murakami’s idea of

the “meaning of the nonsense of the meaning” is conveyed visually through this complicated layering effect.



2.1. *Jellyfish Eyes*, 2001

Takashi Murakami

Acrylic on canvas mounted on board, hung on hand silkscreened wallpaper

Five panels: 39 3/8" x 39 3/8" x 2"

Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Murakami explains that the diffusion across the surface is a Superflat attribute that takes root in both Japanese and Western tradition:

For me, it was not a null, but an infinity. Like David Hockney's photographic collages, there are many different camera eyes, but when you start linking them up one after another into infinity, at some point you brake [sic] through into the "world without the camera eye." (2001b, p. 138)

He asserts his own form of “camera surveillance” with the playful and strategic placement of one of his ball-shaped sculptures covered in eyes, "looking" in every direction from the upper corner of the Blum & Poe Gallery, where one would typically expect a security camera to be found:



2.2. Installation view at *Inochi* exhibition at Blum & Poe Gallery, 2004  
Acrylic paint on fiberglass sphere (approx. 4" diameter)  
Photograph the author

The multiple eyes motif also recurs on the surfaces of his sculptural works, such as *Mr. Pointy* and *Oval*. The characters' bodies are covered in seemingly randomly-placed eyes, some partially closed, or blinking, some wide open, either watching us, daydreaming or simply staring out into space. None of the eyes seem to have a focal point or ability to meet with the gaze of the viewer, deeming the figures able to "watch everything, without caring about anything." (Murakami 2001b, 134) In contrast to the emotional and intellectual emptiness implied by his statements, ©MURAKAMI retrospective exhibition coordinator Mika Yoshitake explains that the repetition and subtle variations that form the eyes' expressions represent skill and connoisseurship. (2007b, n.p.)



2.3. *Flower Ball (3-D)*, 2002

Takashi Murakami

Acrylic on canvas mounted on board

47 1/4" x 47 1/4" x 1 15/16"

Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami

Another example of Murakami's proposed alternatives to the traditional Western or Renaissance perspective is his use of lines to create the illusion of depth, or what he calls a "false perspective." (Kelmachter 2002, 85) To achieve this effect, instead of using shadows, he increases the width of the outlines of the objects in the foreground (or toward the middle in the case of his *Flower Ball* paintings), while the lines toward the outer edge are thinner.

The effect produces an illusion of space or rather, of volume. This is the illusion that I wanted to render symbolically in these works. In a word, as a kind of personal contribution, I wanted to offer the vision of a form of illusion different from the one we find in Western painting. (Murakami in Kelmachter 2002, 85)



## **2.2. Superflat Incorporated: Kaikai Kiki Company and ‘Tokyo Girls Bravo’**

Both the linkage of playfulness from the Eccentrics and the visual characteristics of this Superflat heritage discussed in the previous section are exhibited by Murakami's contemporaries and his “disciples” of the Kaikai Kiki Company. Murakami’s “Super Flat Manifesto,” included in the *Super Flat* exhibition catalogue, indicates that the Superflat sensibility is informed by the collective experience of Japan's Westernisation, which has since transformed Japanese identity:

This book hopes to reconsider "super flatness," the sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a worldview, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future. During the modern period, as Japan has been Westernized, how has this "super flat" sensibility metamorphosed? If that can be grasped clearly, then our stance today will come into focus. (Murakami 2000, 5)

The *Super Flat* group exhibition traveled from Tokyo’s Parco Gallery to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and other venues across the United States. The group show included established and mid-career artists, such as Katsushige Nakahashi and Yoshitomo Nara, as well as the then-emerging young artists, Chiho Aoshima, Aya Takano and Mr., who would become Murakami’s protégés, employees of his Kaikai Kiki Company, and internationally successful artists in their own right. Kaikai Kiki artists have gained exposure and gallery representation through the exhibit of their works via Murakami's curated exhibitions. They are able to achieve success through the sale and exhibition of their works through their association with Murakami and the high level of production at Kaikai Kiki. The Superflat exhibition trilogy pioneered the creation, introduction and the eventual (yet occasional) acceptance of the Superflat as an art historical movement and style.

Murakami organised *Tokyo Girls Bravo* in 2004 at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, featuring the work of ten female artists who were all working as assistants at his Kaikai Kiki studios. The show’s goal was to “provide insight into Tokyo Pop art from the female

perspective by presenting it as a form of escapism, distraction and entertainment within a culture known for its strict social codes.”<sup>21</sup> Both Aoshima and Takano were selected to join the Kaikai Kiki Company to be represented as core artists.

With multiple voices and outlets, Superflat art and its stylistic characteristics are not restricted to Murakami's work, and the Superflat concept does not dictate a singular aesthetic. By including animation, graphic arts, and artists who are untrained in traditional fine art in his curated group exhibitions, and by presenting manga as having a traditionally Japanese historical lineage in his Superflat exhibition trilogy, Murakami demonstrates that his interest as a curator is heavily saturated with issues of cultural examination. The anime and manga forms which stimulate Superflat art have been informed by American comics and cartoons, in addition to the graphic traditions of Japan. Since the exportation and subsequent popularity of anime and manga to consumers to the West in the 1990s, they have also become part of the database of visual aesthetics of artists and fans outside of Japan. (Craig 2000, 7) This contributes to the complex cultural relationships and hybridised aesthetic forms between Japan, the United States and Europe. The resulting transnational constructions of identity contribute to the convolution of the art and cultural forms.

Murakami has become a kind of talent scout for emerging artists in Japan, and he has become known to use his own success to attract interest in younger artists that he "discovers" at his Geisai events and, if he feels a strong personal connection, brings into his company. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix) Superflat artists, Murakami says, create their own version of popular culture to draw attention to the dominance of the media, entertainment and consumption. Significantly, some Superflat artists also work in the industries that they critique.

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<sup>21</sup> Excerpt from the press release for *Tokyo Girls Bravo*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, February 16 – March 13, 2004.



Formerly one of Murakami's assistants, Chiho Aoshima is a successful and skilled artist with no formal or academic fine arts training. Aoshima was discouraged by her family from pursuing the arts and majored in economics at Tokyo's Hosei University. Her self-taught artistic process using the Bezier curves of Adobe Illustrator is unique and internationally popular. The most useful attribute of work produced by Bezier technology is that the images are infinitely scalable without losing quality of resolution and allowing Aoshima's works to be produced at huge scale. This process allows her work to be enlarged exponentially without degradation to the quality of the lines, on any size or surface, from clothing and handbags to posters and wallpaper. Her illustration work is printed out on giant printers and has the visual appeal and seduction of advertising and often appears outside of galleries as public art.

Aya Takano is a graduate of Tama Art University with a degree in art theory, and it seems that her postmodern sensibility has earned "high" art credibility in Europe and the United States. Her art is grounded in Western science fiction as well as Japanese manga, and in addition to her fine art practice, Aya Takano is a graphic designer and science fiction writer. In Japan, she is known primarily as a figure in these subculture outlets, yet in the West, she is regarded solely as a fine artist. Takano draws colourful and cute big-eyed young girls for reproduction on gallery walls, comic books and t-shirts.

As discussed previously in Chapter One, the cuteness concept is deployed again in the work of both Takano and Aoshima.<sup>22</sup> Cultural products from Japan that disguise, disconnect from, or minimise the specificities of their cultural origins do so in order to maximise their global marketing potential. (Iwabuchi 2002a) This lack of cultural specificity, or sterilisation, in turn becomes their "Japaneseness," or the Japanese essence. For example,

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<sup>22</sup> Numerous cultural ethnographers, anthropologists and theorists have also studied the importance of *kawaii* in late 20th century Japan, including Hiroshi Aoyagi, Ōtsuka Eiji and Sharon Kinsella. For an art historical analysis of cuteness in Japan, see Paul J.C. Sutcliffe's 2005 PhD thesis, *Contemporary art in Japan and cuteness in Japanese popular culture* (Chelsea College of Art & Design).

large, colourful, oval or round-shaped eyes, have become characteristic of Japanese cartoons. The eyes do not appear Japanese, and, while viewers think they are watching something Japanese, it is in fact a very un-Japanese representation which itself becomes mistaken for what defines the anime as Japanese. Murakami's Superflat style perpetuates this hybrid phenomenon in his idea that Superflatness as an original Japanese expression. (Murakami 2000, 5) At the same time, Murakami also introduces his aforementioned "soy sauce strategy," which could be an effort to counteract this cultural odourlessness, or "castration" of society, which Murakami believes stems from the loss of the second World War at the hands of the United States through the use of nuclear weaponry. Murakami's strategy then becomes part of a newer movement starting in the 1990s, during which there is growing interest in articulating Japaneseness within exported products from Japan. This movement has been described by scholars as a quieter, more gentle type of cultural nationalism, or "soft nationalism." (Iwabuchi 2002b) Iwabuchi indicates that this newer phenomenon represents a shift away from the postwar tendency toward "cultural odourlessness." Murakami's less-sophisticated "soy sauce" analogy can be seen to represent the more recent turn toward "soft" nationalism.

Takano is part of this movement, or "soft rebellion", which, most likely because of the cultural correlation of femininity and softness, is usually association with female artists. (see Kinsella 1995 and Vartanian 2005) Takano produces remarkably soft images of young pre-pubescent girls and androgynous children. They are usually naked, or only partially clothed, and they almost always have a blush tone to their cheeks, fingers and nipples, indicating sensitivity and to some, eroticism. The figures are nymph-like and fragile, possessing qualities of both human youths and young animals. They are often seen traveling or in forest scenes, as in *Mail Mania Mami Standing in a Storm*.



2.4. *Mail Mania Mami, Standing in a Storm*, 2001  
Aya Takano  
Acrylic on canvas  
23 3/4" x 16 1/4"  
Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

The rabbit can be seen as symbolic of the innocence associated with childhood. As previously viewed in comparison to Murakami in Chapter One, there are similarities to Koons' neo-Pop work of the 1980s in the United States. One of Koons' signature works, *Rabbit* (1986), employs the image of an inflatable bunny that immediately evokes memories of childhood and nostalgia for simple times of the past. Koons "felt it had a sense of innocence that I was looking for at that moment." (in Caldwell 1992, 88) Takano's figurative style depicts the confusion and anxiety also explored by Nara, whose subject matter of partly amorphous children and animals and drawing technique of simple freehand lines align him with a generation of artists associated with youth culture, such as England's *Young British Artists* and America's Shepherd Fairey.

Takano's psychologically rich work has clearly absorbed Japanese comic styles and further emotes a sense of nostalgia for childhood or innocence lost. *Mail Mania Mami Standing in a Storm* (Figure 2.4) transmits innocent emotions of a young girl and suggests a desire to escape from the adult world into nature and perhaps even to become animal rather than human. Takano further extends the depiction of youth as having a connection to nature and an affirmation of life, while the fluidity of the human body suggests a fusion between realms of fantasy and reality. They seem unaffected by gravity, and their flexible, fluid bodies are often interlocked in a kind of dance with one another, or with objects, but could easily slip away.

Takano's use of disproportionately large, dark eyes suggest that the figures are otherworldly and alien. Another interpretation of the exaggerated eyes is that they are always open and inquisitive, finding pure visual beauty in everything, or anything, as in *She saw the liquid through the thin rubber*, from the series of paintings Takano created after visiting the "garbage island" in Tokyo Bay (Figure 2.5). (Lebow 2007, 40) The manmade island is known in Tokyo as the "Island of Dreams" and contains a large waste storage facility, where feral animals prowl and deformed fish swim in toxic ponds. The figures' eyes, in this case, are far from innocent, as they have seen the hidden world of the disposed, rejected and filthy. In one image, a girl carries away an injured animal from the site, her reddened knees echoing the bloody scrapes on the animal's body.



2.5. *The code of the wild, and the tremendous face of the clouds*, 2007

Aya Takano

Acrylic on canvas

5.11' x 7.5'

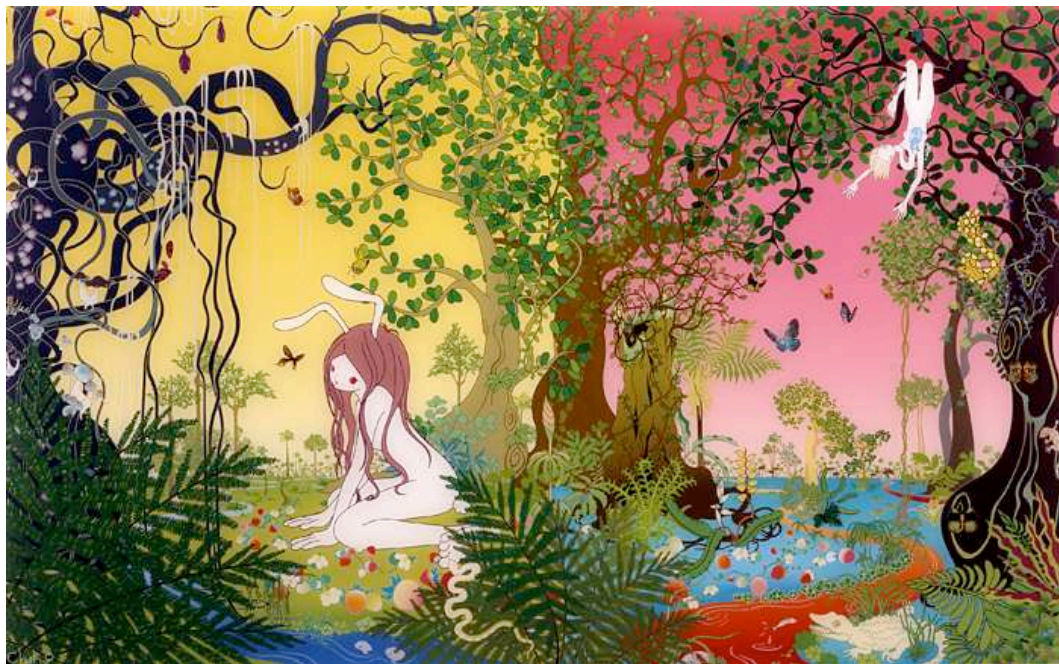
Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

The figures in Takano's works have simplified characteristics of a simple pencil line for a mouth, almond-shaped eyes filled with a few strokes of dark colour and disjointed limbs. Even so, and perhaps precisely *because* of the breakdown of human emotion to a simple set of signs, Takano's work is able to express emotions of desire, sadness, fear and hope probably more poignantly than any other Superflat artist, giving her flatness a different kind of uniqueness and complexity. Because her work also retains the look of being hand-drawn, even in reproduction, her work also escapes the critical attacks directed at Murakami and other Kaikai Kiki artists for being too much like a commodity. Her more humanistic subject matter is associated with the expressionistic and emotionally-connected view of art, which is also interesting because her figures have been simplified in such a way that even characters, such as Dob, can sometimes be seen to possess more "human" attributes (e.g.



pupils, teeth, and experiencing the effects of gravitational pull). This draws attention to potential research and the psychological analysis of visual codes and the importance of the human form for emotional identification, which is outside the scope of this thesis.

Aoshima also presents hybrid subject matter, where human (or woman) meets animal, as in *Strawberry Fields* (Figure 2.6), or nature meets machine, as in the *City Glow* series, and no hierarchy can be established among them. Armed with a vast vocabulary of images drawn from anime and manga, as well as a mastery of computer illustration techniques using Adobe Illustrator software, her expansive colour palette is revealed with precise attention to detail. She presents fantastically complex installations and panoramic views of sensual adolescent goddesses, creatures of other worlds or dreams, and adorable animals and insects in post-apocalyptic scenes of vivid skies and luscious trees.



2.6. *Strawberry Fields*, 2003  
Chiho Aoshima  
Chromogenic print  
33 1/2" x 55"  
Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Aoshima's work can be connected to Edo aesthetics marked by extreme (super) flatness, sharp lines and a decorative style depicting people, animals and objects. The work focuses less on three-dimensionality and more on colour and figuration, primarily that of

birds, flowers and nature. Aoshima's presentation can be seen to follow the older folding screens and ukiyo-e prints that displayed narrative compositions of the past.

A prime example of “low” anime culture of postwar Japan meeting art historical precedent, her work also demonstrates the Superflat attribute of bright spots of colour scattered about the pictorial field, encouraging the viewer’s flowing eye movement. In this way, the viewer is able to enter the composition from any point or angle. A lack of pictorial depth is a Superflat characteristic that allows the viewer to visually enter the painting from any direction, and the concept of playfulness is achieved stylistically by the viewer’s flowing eye movement, or ability to look around a painting without an implied directional flow to the viewer’s gaze. This playful attribute is deployed in both contemporary manga and old master prints, and the masterful control of the viewer’s gaze draws attention to the extreme planarity of the surface.



2.7. *City Glow*, 2005

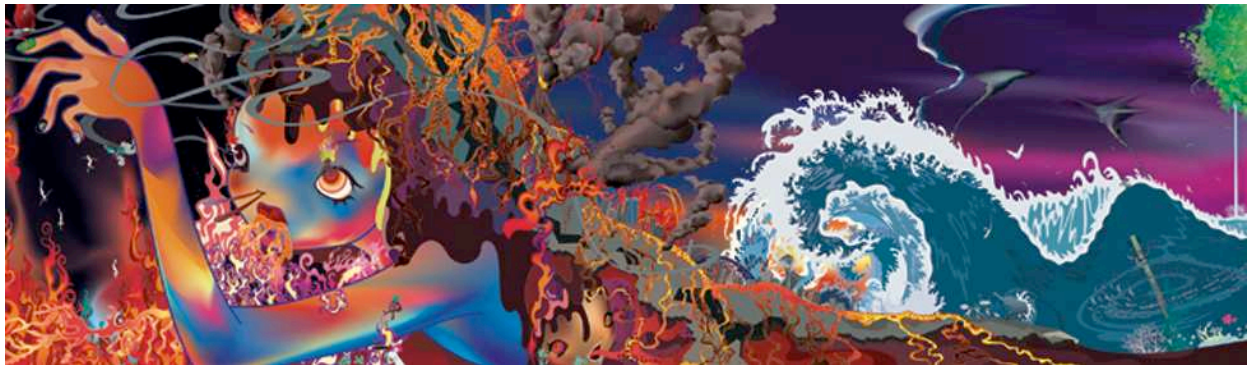
Chiho Aoshima

Digital print on vinyl

67” x 67”

Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

In addition to museum and gallery exhibitions across the United States, *City Glow*, *Mountain Whisper* series was part of the London Underground's "Platform for Art" at Gloucester Road Station in 2006, as well as on the New York City Transit at 14th Street and Union Square in 2005. Divided into multiple panels between the brick arches on the subway and underground platforms, an elaborate urban landscape transforms from day to night. The simultaneous vision of day and night in one composition suggests a merging of past, present and future, or, timelessness. The natural and artificial worlds are fused, while biomorphic buildings shaped like squirming worms sprout antennae and come to life, and plants take on the same real estate, without the resistance or interference of pavement and traffic.



2.8. *Magma Spirit Explodes: Tsunami is Dreadful* (detail), 2004

Chiho Aoshima

Dimensions variable (appeared as 40' wall mural installation in Union Square Station, New York, and Gloucester Road Station, London)

Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin and Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Imitating the curved line of the ocean swell's splashing white foam, Chiho Aoshima references Hokusai's famous "Great Wave" (Figure 3.4) in *Magma Spirit Explodes: Tsunami is Dreadful* (Figure 2.8), which, coincidentally, prophesized the devastating tsunami in Thailand in 2004. This wave is one of two dominating elements in the mural, which displays the powerful forces of nature. At the centre of this narrative of nature's destruction is a captivating beauty with dripping black hair, smoking eyes and flaming nostrils. The other dominating and central element of the composition, this figure is the goddess of the turmoil. In all of her wild rage, there is still a sense of authority and control, or choreography in the



chaos, even as the approaching tsunami threatens to extinguish her. Aoshima's work appears simultaneously disastrous, surreal and sublime.

Although Aoshima is, to some extent, inspired by anime and manga, her subject matter addresses modernisation and the conditions of globalisation by exploring the overlapping of the artificial and the natural. Her mixture of cultural references includes crosses and other religious symbols, decorative tribal jewelry adorning figures, koi goldfish, snakes, and teary-eyed faces of angelic girls or zombies. She is also interested in connecting to people through their daily lives and common experience, rather than focusing on ethnographic associations. While her work has been predominantly displayed in museums and galleries, perhaps her futuristic utopian sensibility is best able to interact in the way that she envisions through the public projects like the *City Glow* series, where her work becomes part of the city landscape of the daily commute.

Like Murakami, Aoshima emphasises her Japanese identity and describes her experience as a Tokyo-based artist:

It's somewhat chaotic, but it also has its own sort of order - it's a city with a human quality... I like everything from Japan. I love antique markets. I love Hokusai... Americans are too overreacting, and Japanese people are too shy (like myself). (in Tucker 2006, 64-5)

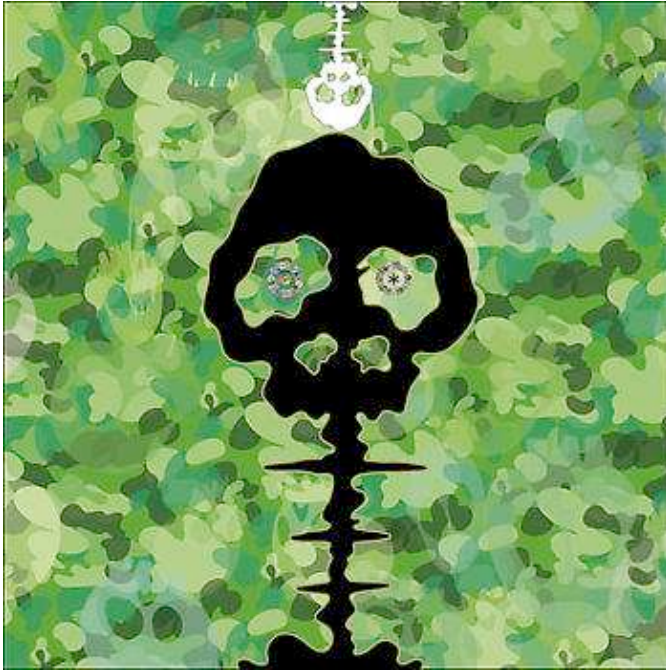
Perhaps a result of her attention to detail, elaborate compositions and mastery of digital illustration, she has somehow been able to bypass the condemnation that Murakami has received for the mass-produced look of his finished products and the use of assistants. In this way, she is an important example of newly established genres, such as digital art.

### 2.3. The Enduring Skull

Kaikai Kiki artists Murakami and Aoshima often explore the skull form in their works, and this symbol can be read in interesting ways in relation to the aforementioned “collective and cultural psyche.” (Sobel and Logan 2004, 34) A distancing, even contemplating, effect is established through the images, in which politics become secondary to concerns of an apocalyptic scale. Contemporary artists in the West from Andy Warhol to Damien Hirst have reintroduced the skull, established symbol of death, darkness and eternity, in their artwork. Murakami’s and Aoshima’s colourful and vibrant representations are lively engagements in the consumption of death, while Hirst manipulates the skull to form a permanent bind between the eternal qualities of life and death and the inevitable presence of desire in human existence.



2.9. *Time Bokan-Pink*, 2001  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
70 7/8” x 70 7/8”  
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York



2.10. Not yet titled (*Time Bokan* series), 2009  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

In the *Time Bokan* series of skeleton-shaped mushroom bombs, Murakami added flower wreaths within the eye sockets and a miniature mirror reflection mushroom cloud at the base of the skull in *Time Bokan-Pink* of 2001. In 2009, he revealed a new addition to the *Time Bokan* series at the Gagosian Gallery in London, which remains untitled at the time of this thesis (Figure 2.10). This latest version of the now familiar atomic bomb form revisits the mushroom cloud with more complexity than seen previously in the *Time Bokan* series by replacing the flat monochromatic background with a camouflage-like pattern consisting of layered skull faces in varying levels of transparency. The pattern references Murakami's claim that "the true start of Superflat" is Andy Warhol's *Camouflage* paintings (Kaplan 2001, 95), as well as serving as a reminder of the aftermath of nuclear annihilation from which Superflat arises. Warhol's large-scale canvas works, known as the "camo paintings" were created during the same year as his death in 1987. At this time, the Cold War nuclear arms race facilitated the United States' military's production and testing of nuclear weapons at an

excessive rate, while Japan was experiencing the bubble economy. The powerful American corporate entities were anxious about this rising economic power in the East. Murakami's success then began in the 1990s, shortly after the bubble burst, and following Emperor Hirohito's death in 1989.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the *Time Bōkan* concept is derived from the animated series of Murakami's childhood in the 1970s. Many Japanese animations since the 1970s, including the series on which Murakami's *Time Bōkan* is based, have post-apocalyptic settings and backdrops. The scenes present a devastated world of mutants, usually ruined by nuclear or ecological disasters, inevitably caused by the follies of humankind. Japan itself is already a post-apocalyptic nation due to the devastating effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which completely flattened the two major cities. This haunted past informs the work of artists of the late twentieth century, though both Aoshima's and Murakami's works can also be seen to recall the woodblock prints of the *ukiyo-e* master, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861). Kuniyoshi is well-known for his subtle satires, saturated colours and innovative compositions, as well as his use of skull imagery. A giant demonic ghost takes the form of a skeleton, which looms overhead like an approaching storm cloud (Figure 2.11).

Contrary to Kuniyoshi's demon-like skull specter and Hiroshige's nightmarish garden of skull forms, Aoshima's *A Contented Skull* (Figure 2.12) seems to be dispossessed. The entangled branches indicate that the skull has been resting for a long time. In addition to the skulls being adorned with blossoming branches, the title of the work assigns the feeling of contentment, and by doing so indicates that the skull is itself living, in that it is fulfilling a certain destiny by remaining dead, rather than possessed.



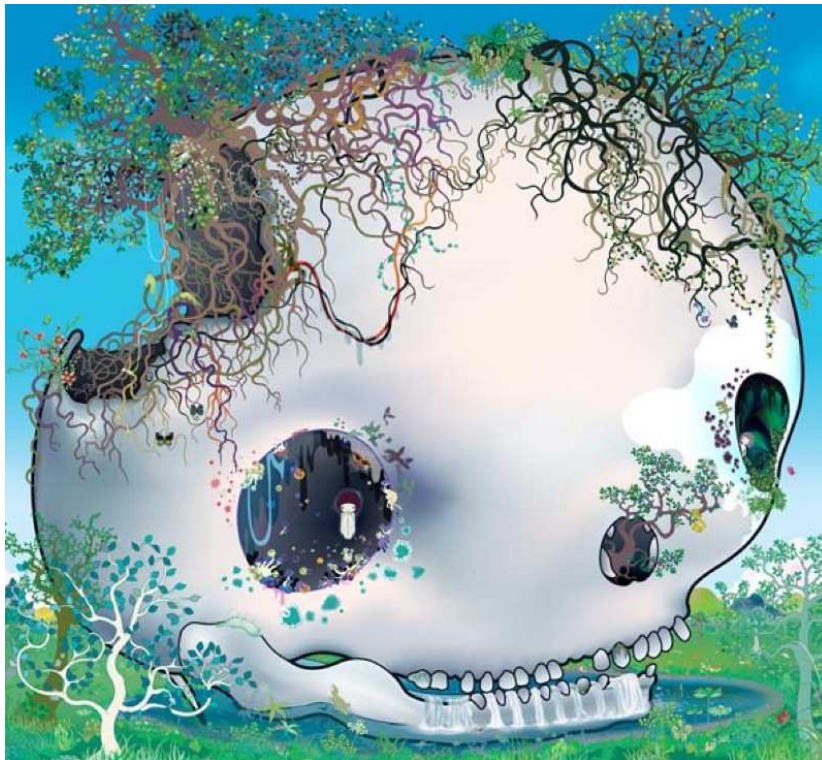
2.11. *Mitsukuni Defies a Skeleton Specter*, 1845-6  
Utagawa Kuniyoshi  
Colour woodblock print  
14 5/6 x 29 7/8"  
The British Museum



2.12. *A Contented Skull*, 2008  
Chiho Aoshima  
Offset lithograph print  
23.4" x 51.2"  
Courtesy of Lieberman Gallery via Artnet



The aestheticisation of death and disaster through the continued presence of the skull is apparent in Aoshima's *The Fountain of the Skull* (Figure 2.13), in which the huge skull sits in a lush field of green grass and a pool of deep blue water. Colourful vines and blossoming trees grow through a hole in the skull, perhaps caused by a fatal blow to the head once felt by the semi-human being who formerly occupied the skull. Floating nymph-like children peak through the eye sockets. The scene is crisp and wet upon a brilliant blue sky backdrop.

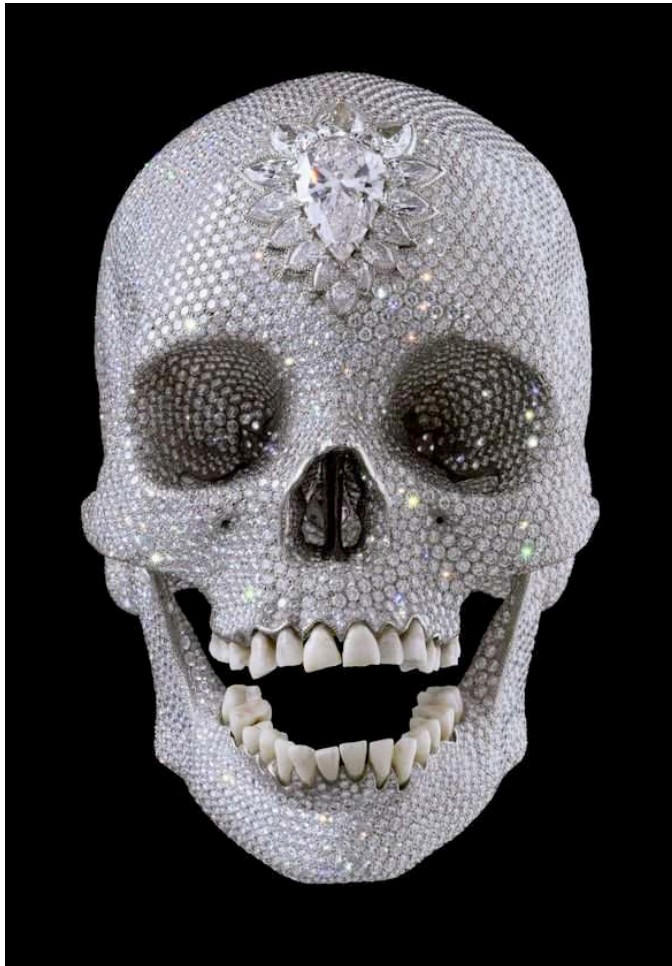


2.13. *The Fountain of the Skull*, 2008  
Chiho Aoshima  
Offset print with silver  
741mm x 680mm  
Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin and Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted platinum cast of a human skull, *For the Love of God* (Figure 2.14), mixes the more traditional memento mori with the excess and desire entangled in the value of the materials. The fundamental themes of life, death and immortality reach an apex with the piece, which made immediate headlines upon its completion. It was fabricated with eight thousand six hundred and one high quality diamonds and sold to an investment group (including Hirst himself) for approximately one hundred

million U.S. dollars, making it the most expensive piece of art in history. (Shaw 2007, n.p.)

With reference to Mexican skulls encrusted in turquoise, Hirst's "diamond skull" deals with modern controversies over blood diamonds in Africa and becomes symbolic of the extravagance of our time. (Shaw 2007, n.p.)



2.14. *For the Love of God*, 2007  
Damien Hirst  
Platinum, diamonds and human teeth  
6 3/4" x 5" x 7 1/2"  
Prudence Cuming Associates and White Cube

Even prior to Hirst's *For the Love of God*, Murakami gives recognition to Hirst's work and attributes his success as an artist to his strength in marketing. This marketing talent, Murakami suggests, is a result of a cyclical presentation of key themes:

Only those artists who have an ability in marketing can survive in the art world. Damien Hirst is a good example. Through his art, you can see the process of how an artist can survive in the art world. First of all, distinctively situate his/her position in art history. Second, articulate what the beauty of his/her art is. Next, sexuality. Then, death. Present what he/she finds in death. If an artist aptly rotates this cycle, he/she can survive. Damien Hirst has been repeating the cycle of birth, death, love, sex and beauty... That's why Picasso has been continuously consumed as well as Warhol. This attests that artists that have a sense of the market make the best of the rotation... Damien Hirst expressed death so successfully by slicing cows that viewers understood him. (Murakami in Wakasa 2000, n.p.)

## **2.4. Pop+Surrealism**

The Superflat generation of artists is living in and reacting to the new era of global communication and unprecedented technological innovation. The current world is a hyperreal age of digital media with a frenzy of images circulating the globe at unprecedented rates of speed and saturation. Both the world of dreams and fantasy and the reality of capitalism and the consumer inform the work of contemporary artists, including those in Murakami's Superflat movement and the Kaikai Kiki Company.

Kept alive and built up over a few decades, Japan's postwar period extends into the 1990s signaling what some historians believe was a deferred ending of the postwar. (Harootunian and Yoda 2006, 1) This narrative of the long postwar while Japanese were holding on to a cultural dependency under the United States, while Americans were detaching themselves from the "partnership," created what Harootunian calls Japan's "distorted history" and an "empty fiction." (Harootunian 2006, 2) This second postwar period echoes an earlier time in the 1930s, interestingly simultaneous with Surrealism in the West, when Japanese writers identified the importation of commodity culture into a form of "mental and cultural colonialism." (Harootunian 2006, 100)



Spawned by the Industrial Age in Europe, Surrealism was a retreat into the subconscious at the time between two world wars, as a new technological age had arrived. In the 1920s, Surrealism made its way over to the United States, and they were drawn to film and the potential of the animated cartoon that was becoming a beloved form of entertainment and popular interest. By the 1930s, the presence and use of comics and cartoons in everyday popular culture had become significant, and the characters had become “surrogates,” “cultural icons that could be manipulated and transformed to express both personal and societal emotions.” (Klein 1998, 25) Mickey Mouse, as well as characters used in advertisements to promote products, such as Mr. Clean, became as iconic and culturally reachable as Marilyn or Elvis. American Pop artists, such as Warhol, who will be discussed further in Chapter Three, carried this observation into the 1960s and recreated the images of popular culture in their work.

Although their artwork has been exhibited within the Superflat concept, the work of Kaikai Kiki artists can be associated with a number of different styles, one of which is “Pop Surrealism,” a postmodern reinvention of Surrealism with a Pop twist. The current movement of Pop Surrealism is borne of street art and lowbrow art, and its historical and geographical origins have been credited to hot rod culture and underground comics in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. (see Anderson 2004) The genre can be identified by its sometimes humorous subject matter, bright colours and popular culture subjects, and the usually figurative works contain elements of the earlier movements of both Pop and Surrealism. The specific cultural references and technological sensibilities can be seen as indicators that place the works in the present.

Formed within the Lowbrow art movement of the late 1990s, the status and place of Pop Surrealist works in contemporary art have been at odds with the mainstream art world of established fine art galleries and contemporary museums. This exclusion is, arguably, an

accepted and intentional characteristic of the Lowbrow movement, yet the work is nonetheless sought by collectors, even though many art critics doubt that lowbrow is a "legitimate" art movement.

The perceived absence of internal critique associated with artists who come from the fields of graphics and illustration alienates them from the intellectual and scholarly circles. However, their accessibility and exposure through recent publications has grown rapidly to attain both popularity with general audiences and acceptance into art libraries and museum shop magazine stands.<sup>23</sup> A number of artists who started their careers by showing in the less-reputable lowbrow galleries have gone on to exhibit their work in established fine art galleries and contemporary museum group exhibitions, while a number of mainstream artists, like Murakami and Takano, have participated in Lowbrow exhibitions. The common thread or network is the deconstruction of the distinction between low and high art. These origins also link to Dada and Duchamp of the early twentieth century, and, in this way, Murakami also uses this connection to a more widely accepted and established movement in order to counter debates from Western art critics who accuse him of being shallow:

Why are people very surprised it came from an artist? That is a trick, right? That is art history. Like George Maciunas has Dada... Fluxus, right? That was a very small market he created, but in history it's a big thing. That is art history. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

Whether or not it is always an intentional approach for Lowbrow artists to communicate to the intellectual and critical discourses of the previous century, the re-examination of these distinctions can be identified as a strategy of contemporary Pop artists and neo-Surrealism. Like Dada and Surrealism, the Lowbrow movement, at its inception, was (or claimed to be) anti-art. This sense of radicalism is played out in Pop Surrealism via the anti-intellectual and

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<sup>23</sup> *Juxtapoz* (magazine) is the key publication associated with the Low Brow and Pop Surrealism movements. The first edition debuted in Winter 1994 and featured artists Robert Williams, Big Daddy Roth, Von Dutch, John Pound, and Zap Comix no. 13. (see <http://www.juxtapoz.com> )

pro-populist conventions of comic art and the banality, even obscenity, of underground “hipster” American culture. (Klein 1998, 37-8)

Unlike other previous historical art movements, such as Cubism, Surrealism and Pop seem to not only possess an ability to survive and maintain relevance through appropriation, but they are reinvigorated continuously into the twenty first century. Why have Surrealism and Pop survived long after the artists within these movements were dead? Perhaps this incredible trait of survivability is not governed by the same social conventions as an art historical style. Despite being “at odds with one another in their purest forms” (Klein 1998, 34), Surrealism’s probing of the unconscious and Pop’s emphasis on the everyday and the mundane are brought together, and the prevailing “attitudes” (Baddeley 2010, n.p.) of Pop and Surrealism can be expressed in different times and places. The ideas behind the intentions of the movements can then reappear through new manifestations with different “looks.”

Murakami’s Superflat idea captures a post-apocalyptic aesthetic for the ambiguous future of the twenty-first century. Although his mushroom landscapes bear little resemblance to mushrooms found in nature, they may be symbolic of an escapist approach to dealing with complex social issues. The landscape becomes a metaphor for contemporary life, in which reality is distorted in the virtual world and easily manipulated by computers. Taken by the escapist desires and fascinated by “exotic” pictorial motifs, ornamental backgrounds, emphasis on planarity, and the placelessness of the figure on the pictorial space, European artists and collectors were taken by Japonisme. (Brehm 2002, 8) Today’s manga art can also be seen to project escapist desires, though the seductive new compositions are more complex. (Brehm 2002, 8) The preference for fantasy in the individual subconscious results from the “collective and cultural psyche” of the new generation. (Sobel and Logan 2004, 34)

### 3. POP AFTER POP: CRITICALITY AND CAPITALISM

Renoir? I hate him. Cezanne? Bedroom pictures. It's all the same... There's no satire, there's no today, there's no fun. That other art is for old ladies, all those people who go to auctions – it's nothing, it's dead. Pop is the art of today, and tomorrow, and all the future. These pictures are like IBM stock, don't forget that, and this is the time to buy, because pop is never going to die.<sup>24</sup>

#### 3.1. Pop Expressions: The Superflat Splash and the Flattening Process

With the import and export of culture being as quick and simple as the click of a mouse, or as complex and historic as global political conflict, many artists are focused on creating a body of work that leaves a lasting impression through commerce. Recent efforts to merge art and commercial practices represent a continuation of 1960s Pop art. The tendency to blend art into the postmodern climate of global capitalism serves commercial interests, but also presents a risk wherein the critical content of art is evacuated. This tendency also benefits from Warholian concepts, such as the democratisation of taste. This chapter examines some of the similarities, as well as the key differences in the production and consumption of Murakami's Superflat brand of new Pop.

Murakami's *Signboard TAKASHI* (1992) (Figure 3.1) is a painted replica of the print advertisement and logo for "Tamiya," a Japanese plastic and resin model kit manufacturer. The work was created while Murakami was still in art school, and Tamiya is the same company who made the miniature plastic tanks and toy soldiers that Murakami enjoyed as a child in the late 1960s. It was not until later that he reconsidered the company's slogan, "First in quality around the world," which he considers to be a remarkably ambitious, rare and grand statement for a Japanese company, especially in the postwar time period.

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<sup>24</sup> Leon Kraushar in "You Bought It. Now Live with It: The Country's Leading Collectors of Pop Art enthusiastically Fill Their Homes with It," *Life* (July 16, 1965): 59. Quoted in Irving Sandler, *American Art of the Sixties* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 133-134.

(Murakami 2007, n.p.) He appreciates its pride, as he believes the Japanese had no collective confidence after the war.

Although Murakami's art has a colourful and happy façade, in contrast, Murakami said of his art in 1998, "I express hopelessness... If my art looks positive and cheerful, I would doubt my art is accepted in the contemporary art scene. My art is not Pop art. It is a record of the struggle of the discriminated people." (in Wakasa 2000, n.p.) However, his appropriation of the advertisement and insertion of his own name ("TAKASHI" in place of "TAMIYA") in the 1992 sign piece demonstrates that Murakami was already thinking about developing a brand identity early on.



3.1. *Signboard Takashi*, 1992

Takashi Murakami

Plywood and sticker with brand

27 9/16" x 18 7/8" x 9/16"

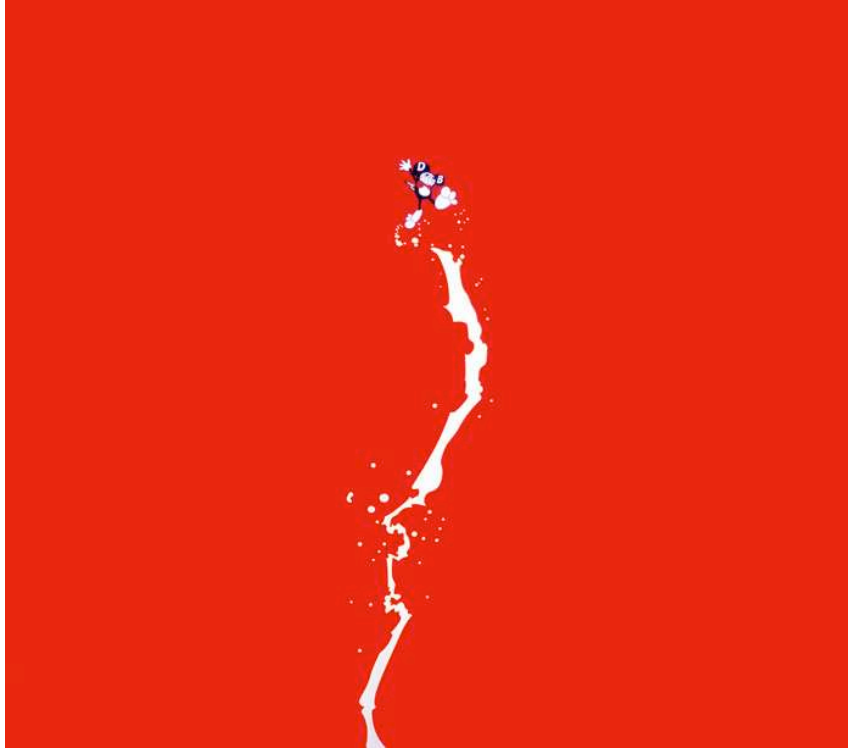
Courtesy of the artist



3.2. *Dob Genesis*, 1993  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas mounted on wood  
43 5/16" x 43 5/6"  
Private Collection, New York

In other early works from the start of the 1990s, the original Dob character is always blue. In his monochromatic work of 1993, *Dob Genesis* (Figure 3.2), close scrutiny reveals that this blue is no ordinary blue; it appears to be remarkably similar to Klein blue, whose medium was developed and patented by the artist Yves Klein in the late 1950s, and the pigment is now officially known as *IKB* or *International Klein Blue*. Murakami was interested in Expressionism at this time, as well as the neo-Expressionist works of Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer and their heroic personas. (Yoshitake 2007b, n.p.) He invented Dob as a kind of trademark, stamped in the middle of the blue field of the painting. Murakami also acknowledges Western art historical associations, and consequently, by

connecting his emphasis on planarity and surface value to an authentic Japanese tradition, he challenges the idea that Western artists offered innovation to the Japanese pre-modern style, insinuating that Japanese pre-modern art was essentially postmodern and that Superflat is flatter than 1950s American Modernism.



3.3. *ZaZaZaZaZaZa*, 1994  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas mounted on board  
59 1/16" x 66 15/16"  
Takahashi Collection, Tokyo

According to art critic and curator, Yūsuke Minami, Murakami's "splash paintings" of the late 1990s use Japanese animation to mock the glory of Abstract Expressionism and parody the most mythical machismo ascribed to the brushstrokes of the movements leaders, DeKooning and Pollock. (Minami 2001, 54, 59) Although the re-interpretation of the "action painting" style had already been addressed by Pop artists in the 1960s, such as Roy Lichtenstein, Murakami's assimilation of the Abstract Expressionist gesture also deals with the inherent problems of anime and manga as a culture. Some of his "splash" paintings picture his character, Dob, flattened twice over as "the exploitation of flowery, Disney-like,

3-dimensional American animation and its flattening by interpretation into an alien cultural dimension.” (Minami 2001, 59-60) The composition of Hokusai’s Wave, like the "splash paintings," functions visually to concentrate or contain the movement into an instant action.



3.4. *In the Hollow of the Wave off the Coast at Kanagawa*, c. 1830-1831  
Katsushika Hokusai  
colour woodcut  
10” x 15”  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Since this flattening process is a manifestation of the tradition of Japanese painting, and because his work is so purposefully steeped in art historical references, Murakami’s “splash” paintings might further suggest that the calligraphic brushstrokes employed by traditional Japanese painters, which express pictorial space uni-dimensionally, were borrowed by the Abstract Expressionists. (Minami 2001, 59) The techniques of Abstract Expressionism are seen as being informed by a traditional Japanese style, such as American artists in the 1950s studying Zen Buddhism and Japanese calligraphy.

Murakami’s early work caters to subcultures, critics and consumers, and the conflation of art and commerce offers a fantasy world of characters, offering consolation or confirmation of the postmodern condition. Though the Dob character first appeared as little



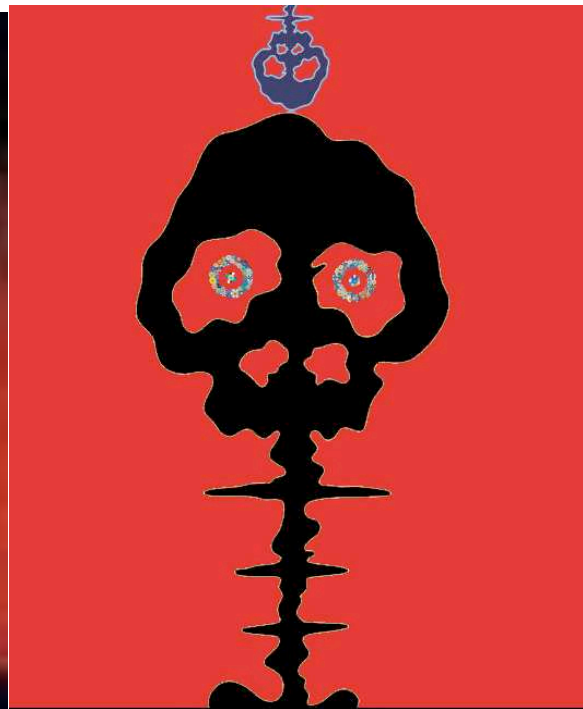
more than a stamp on the monochromatic *Dob Genesis*, he has since morphed into different forms and mediums. Still early in his development, Dob appeared in *And Then And Then And Then And Then And Then* (Figure 1.5), as discussed previously in Chapter One, with an old-film-like texture composed of blue paint and exaggerated features, including big eyes, ears, and a smile reminiscent of Mickey Mouse. There are clear similarities to Warhol's early Pop work, and while Murakami undeniably owes a great deal to his predecessor, a further exploration and different directions of critique of their techniques is needed.

### 3.2. Disaster, Play and Consumption: 'Japan's Andy Warhol'

"Superflat" is not an authentic successor of "pop" but its hybrid, mixed, fake bastard. (Azuma 2001, n.p.)



3.5. *Atomic Bomb* (detail), 1965  
Andy Warhol  
Silkscreen on canvas  
104" x 80 1/2"  
Saatchi Collection, London



3.6. *Time Bokan-Red* (detail), 2001  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board  
70 7/8" x 70 7/8"  
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Both the theme of disaster and the repetition of these images presents another one of the several opportunities to parallel Warhol's work of the early 1960s, such as the *Death and Disasters* painting series of car crashes, burn victims, food contamination deaths, and the *Atomic Bomb* (Figure 3.5). These images may have suggested the ultimate breakdown of the American sense of trust and hopefulness in technological innovation and consumer culture. Through repetition, the anxiety produced by the images was diluted or, perhaps, intensified. The demystification of the art-making process, as opposed to the Abstract Expressionist connection with emotions and nature, was initiated by Andy Warhol's "factory" method, making for frequent, but impetuous, comparisons between Murakami's and Warhol's practices.

Warhol himself, who was in many ways a character or persona he created, freely asserted that his works were truly superficial: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at surface of my paintings and films and me. There's nothing behind it." His claim that everything you need to know about his work is on the surface suggests that there is no deeper theme for which to search. Murakami's Superflat concept is an extension of this idea, which also extends from traditional Japanese art and its flat, yet transcendental, qualities. This idea fuses into contemporary Japanese life and is especially noticeable in its class-system, which prevails in the middle. Murakami refers to the current condition of Japanese society and states that, "In Japan, there is no high and there is no low. It's all flat." (in Pagel 2001, 190) With no high or low, Murakami indicates, it is a *super flat* culture, and the Superflat generation of art reflects this. By this explanation, Murakami differs from Warhol in that he insists on the deeper issues behind the flat and colourful surfaces of his work when he states, "My work looks very simple, but honestly underneath it is complex." (Murakami in Pitman 2009, n.p.) He believes that the Japanese, as a culture, must "transcend this flat surface" in order to "achieve respectability as a culture." (Murakami 2005, 153) Art

professionals, the public and the press frequently disclaim Murakami's work for its apparent brashness and commercialism.

While Warhol openly claimed to be superficial and allowed others to inscribe meaning into his work, Murakami claims to be meaningful. Curators of Tate Modern's *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* (2009) identify a similarity in the two artists' personas as the ability to view and make art as a business or commercial practice. The exhibition, originally titled *Sold Out*, bases its theme on Warhol's statement that "good business is the best art," an excerpt from the longer quote:

Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist. After I did that thing called "art" or whatever it's called, I went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. During the hippie era people put down the idea of business – they'd say "Money is bad," and "Working is bad, but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art. (Warhol 1997, 92)

What the *Pop Life* exhibition curators left out of their exploration of the artist's persona was the side of Warhol that was distant, closed off, and decidedly blank. Warhol publicly hid his intellectual side and often claimed that he had no original ideas, publicly denying any suggestion of depth in his personality and his artwork:

Viva: Do you want me to tell you about Andy?

Journalist: Oh, go ahead.

Viva: Anything Andy does is fantastic because he's a saint.

Journalist: A saint?

Viva: Yea.

Journalist: St. Andy the First.

Viva: He really loves people, so anything he does is beautiful because he sees the best in everybody.

Journalist: Mmm hmm.

Viva: He sees God wherever he looks, and in whoever he looks at. So that's why they call it art, because he's just very good, you know, he's very pure so they call it art, that's what they call art, and some things... just done, um, with a touch of divinity.

Warhol: Fudge.

Journalist: What?

Warhol: Fudge.<sup>25</sup>

In another contrast to Warhol's aloofness, Murakami gives one-on-one interviews and thoughtfully ponders each question before giving a response. He is more suggestive in both interviews and written work in regards to art historical and spiritual connections. Although he does not often credit his own academic studies as the basis of his Superflat work, he views himself as a kind of educator. Superflat theory is heavy with art historical and philosophical references, and Murakami has published manifestos and essays in his own publications and exhibition catalogues.

Warhol took his quiet but calculating and clever ability to allow others to speak for him so far as to have someone else portray him in the 1967 headline-making incident where he sent one of his film actors to impersonate him on a university lecture tour across the United States.<sup>26</sup> His "superstars" were part of his persona, which could also be said to be his greatest work of art. Murakami's assistants, however, are employees behind the scenes, while the Kaikai Kiki artists, such as Aoshima and Takano, have their own identities as artists in their own right.

However, Murakami also explored the theme of the human being as a product in his early work "The Kase Taishuu Project" of 1995. The performance was based on the Japanese pop star who forfeited his right to his own name to his manager. The manager then gave the name to another actor, followed by a string of young men in the entertainment industry called "Kase Taishuu." For his piece, Murakami hired four art students to use the name and managed to convince the press and the public. (Saltz 1999, 65)

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<sup>25</sup> Transcription of video footage available online. [accessed 29 April 2010]:  
<<http://www.guyhepner.com/videos/index/andy-warhol-that-s-why-they-call-it-art>>  
Author was unable to establish original citation of the interview, as it is undocumented by The Archives Collection of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh.

<sup>26</sup> A clipping of the *Daily Utah Chronicle*'s story, "Phony Warhol Suspected" (31 January 1968) is located in the Archives Collection of the Andy Warhol Museum.

Like Warhol, Murakami utilises assistants to work on elements of his work, forming a production method that mimics that of a factory assembly line. The Kaikai Kiki company was started as the "Hiropon Factory," but the manner in which the studio began to function surpassed Warhol's in terms of efficiency and organisation with clearly established roles and talents from each worker of the art collective. The collaborative system of the Kaikai Kiki company and studios was developed to produce "art products" (Kelmachter 2002a, 2002b) and has looked beyond the reference to Warhol's factory to implement corporate business models, such as Microsoft. (Kaikai Kiki website 2008, n.p.) Once he made use of the established art historical reference to an American Pop art star, he re-named the company and established it as a corporation, Kaikai Kiki, Ltd., reflecting the shift in the nature of art production into the multinational enterprise it is today.

Thanks to the appropriation, my image is linked to Warhol.  
Now, people keep asking me about my relationship with  
Warhol. Oh, my god - my strategy was a mistake. I've stopped  
that. I'm looking for something original." (Murakami in Castro  
2008, 40)

Murakami is often confronted with questions of originality because of his use of assistants to carry out his artwork, as well as his appropriation of Warholian concepts. The workshop method of art production both in Japan and the West, however, has predated Warhol by centuries. Murakami has developed this collective style of working as both an alliance with the traditional Japanese method of working, as seen in the ukiyo-e studios of the Edo period, and the way of contemporary manga and animation studios and other creative industries in Japan. His role as creative director or president is also inherited from the historical manner of master/teacher to student hierarchy and the practice of copying masterworks.<sup>27</sup> According

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<sup>27</sup> The collective working method is also continued in current Nihonga training, which emphasises the copying of masterworks and the repetitive technical practice with brushwork and depictions of traditional motifs, such as flowers, clouds or animals, as well as the use of Japanese glue paints and gold foil sheets.

to Murakami, there are other reasons, apart from the desire for originality, to work in a factory-style method today.

In Japan, nothing is real... Here, everything is fake. Everything is managed and controlled - one reason I started the Hiropon company is because I'm interested in producing artists. It is possible to make an art-idol in the way the music industry or the movie industry produces pop stars." (Murakami in Pagel 2001, p.192)

Warhol's "factory," in its glory days of the 1960s, was more like a cool hang-out with a revolving door for friends, and friends of his friends, young drug addicts, misfits from society, rich kids wanting to escape their parents' rigid expectations and "wanna-be" artists and actors. It was known as a place where they could relax and be themselves, and, in many cases, Warhol encouraged their otherwise unacceptable behaviour and even filmed them and made them his "superstars." Warhol had only a small team of usually five or six people at any given time who were actually working on his art and business. It was after he was shot and nearly killed by Valerie Solanas in 1968 that he closed the "factory" and moved into the safe confines of an office building and stopped most of his associations with those "factory" members who he had supposedly worked so closely in the early years, and stayed there for the rest of his long career until his death in 1987. Nonetheless, Warhol went further than commenting on capitalism in his work or parodying business methods. He engaged in the promotion of his art and himself, and this engagement was not simply opportunistic in order to gain fame, but it was essential to the meaning and interpretation of the work itself.

Murakami's production process emphasises the value of technique and the precision of professional artisans with strict criteria for the finished presentation of his works. The final paintings have a smooth, pristine, flat surface that leaves little evidence of hand work or brush strokes. Does Murakami's use of fine art production techniques to produce paintings and sculptures (whether or not the end product looks mass-produced) reinforce the art/product binary? In order to fully submerge the art into the mass culture arena, Murakami

would need to abandon traditional painting techniques. Warhol's silkscreen painting technique and factory method of producing his paintings addressed the idea of mass-produced paintings. This concept of seriality also deemed the artist's "touch" irrelevant. The authenticity of the works came (and continue to come) under scrutiny, as practically anyone could have physically reproduced a "genuine" Warhol work of art.

Murakami also uses the screen-printing process, though he insists on meticulous hand and brushwork as a necessary part of the entire production process of his paintings. He has also differentiated his practice from Warhol's silkscreen technique by incorporating the aforementioned traditional Japanese painting methods and nihonga techniques. Another innovation available to Murakami is digital compositing, and his art "factory" has a computer database of images that are ready to be inserted into an artwork or design as and when decided.



3.7. Kaikai Kiki Studio, New York, ca. 2008  
Source: <http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp/>  
©Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Murakami employs hundreds of people who often work long days of up to sixteen hours on a Japanese working day plan in his Kaikai Kiki Company's combined offices and

studios in Tokyo, New York, and now Los Angeles. Kaikai Kiki has thus become a real corporation that employs and manages the distribution of the represented artists' paintings, sculptures, prints and associated products. This "structural methodology" is underscored by the publication of texts that detail the Kaikai Kiki production process. (Murakami 2001b) His employees also adhere to a thick written manual outlining the production processes. Furthermore, however similar they appear in simplified comparisons, Murakami is more of an entrepreneur and businessman (Warhol's "business" and financial affairs were handled by Fred Hughes). At the same time, credit must be given where due, as Murakami "holds the torch" passed to many contemporary artists since Warhol, illuminating the idea that "business art is the best art," and, "being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art."

Keith Haring is another example of a Pop artist who worked within this realm of art and commercial politics. Haring's initial intention was not to become a brand, though he wanted to sell his art to both collectors and "kids," making his art affordable via his "Pop Shop" in New York. (2009, n.p.) The difference between his and Murakami's efforts is that Murakami's method of production implements the corporate model. Furthermore, Murakami has taken it to the extent of calculating the limits of his production as an individual and incorporated the backing of his company and assistants in order to facilitate mass production on a much larger scale than his American Pop art predecessors. This uninhibited emphasis on the sale and merchandising of Murakami's work causes a great deal of criticism and questioning of his work as art or commercial product, even though Murakami continuously insists that they are one and the same.





3.8. *Oxidation*, 1978  
Andy Warhol  
Urine, metallic pigment and acrylic on linen  
48" x 49" (12 parts)  
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

As stated previously, Murakami's 727 has been compared to Warhol's "Oxidation" series (Figure 3.8) because of the similarities in the appearance of the surface texture. (Schimmel 2007, 72-3) The connection, however, is most likely coincidental. One of the main sources for Murakami's 727 is the early-Edo period painting by Sōtatsu Tawaraya, *Wind God and Thunder God* (Figure 1.9) (Kataoka 2008, n.p.), as well as 12<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese scroll paintings. (Castro 2008, 40) Murakami is using techniques of nihonga and looking at lacquer ware surfaces and the textures created in traditional Japanese artistry, and he updates the process of looking backward in history to inform the present with a contemporary cultural reference:

I am like a D.J. mixing a good sound – looking for a good beat, good melody. I saw the monk's scroll with its cloud shapes, which were ahead of their time, and I used that with a DOB face. (in Castro 2008, 41)

The lineage to the Eccentrics that Murakami presents in Superflat is using examples already familiar in the West. Therefore, as the images to which Murakami refers are already part of the Western image database as representative of Japanese art, the lineage is also the means through which Murakami can articulate the Japanese identity of Superflat as what makes it unique in the West and distinguishes Superflat from Pop. This articulation of Japanese identity in the recognisable codes of Western art is an advantageous marketing tool for the sale of Superflat art works in American art markets. Furthermore, Murakami is able to negotiate a dual-identity that presents both his Japanese artistic lineage and his artist identity in Western art discourse.

Both Warhol and Murakami have produced multiple paintings of the same subject: flowers. Both artists have flattened the images and used bright, saccharine colors to produce their flower paintings. Murakami regards the human face as an “extremely sexual object” and claims that flowers have the same power. (Kelmachter 2002a, 6, 84) Warhol’s twentieth century “city” flowers lack emotional qualities, while Murakami’s flowers actually become animated characters growing (so to speak) in a field. Though the process Murakami employs to create the immaculately smooth surface is a feature of nihonga painting, it is also a feature of factory-style mass production. The grouping of personified flowers also resembles a crowd scene with the intention of conveying a disturbing or threatening feeling.

I spent nine years working in a preparatory school, where I taught the students to draw flowers. Once every two days, I would buy flowers for my lesson and make compositions for the students to work on. At the beginning, to be frank, I didn't like flowers, but as I continued teaching in the school, my feelings changed: their smell, their shape, it all made me feel almost physically sick, and at the same time I found them very "cute". Each one seemed to have its own feelings, its own personality. And these days, now that I draw flowers frequently, that sensation has come back vividly. I find them just as pretty, just as disturbing. At the same time there is this strength in them, it is the same image of strength I find when drawing human faces. (Murakami in Kelmachter 2002a, 84)

Both Warhol's and Murakami's flowers are first divorced from their natural referents: in Murakami's case, they are first engineered by scanning and manipulation in a computer graphics programme, and then skillfully painted by professional artisans in his studio. Through machine-like production and plasticity, Warhol's flowers can be seen to strip the subject of association with emotion. There is a sense of stillness, entropy, and even death (Pratt 1997, 23), but Murakami carefully renders every little sweet, happy, smiling detail, wherein there is a sense of flowing movement, joy and life. The smiling flowers in his work may also be interpreted as sick or disturbed; a smile is not always happy and can be a mask for anxiety. Murakami reveals that "smiling is sometimes a hard job." (MOCA Exhibition Tour 2008, n.p.) The record-breaking attendance of his retrospective exhibition is perhaps telling of our own needs to escape reality and head into a world of fantasy.



3.9. *Flowers*, 1964  
Andy Warhol  
Acrylic and silkscreen on linen  
24" x 24"  
Private Collection, New York



3.10. *Killer Pink* (detail)  
Takashi Murakami  
Offset lithograph  
27" x 27"  
Collection of Guy Hepner, Los Angeles  
©Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

*Killer Pink* (Figure 3.10), and most of Murakami's paintings, are painted by hand, a point that he attributes as an important link to his nihonga training and the conventions of traditional Japanese painting. On the flipside, Warhol and his assistants used the silkscreen, which resulted in "accidents" and bleeding ink. It is unclear as to whether these accidents were welcome, or if Warhol was actually lamenting the detectable uniqueness and degradation this gave to the paintings which were copies: "I haven't been able to make every image clear and simple as the first one." (Harrison and Wood 2003, 748) While the ink traces left by Warhol's use of the silkscreen visually indicated the means of its own machine-like production and replicated existing imagery from mass-produced sources, Murakami is meticulous in artisan-style hand-painted techniques, creating paintings that blend seamlessly into the commercial landscape.

The classic flowers motif is found in traditional Japanese painting, but Murakami's flowers are not only a stylistic element in his paintings. They also work as personified stand-

alone subjects for his sculptures, while also serving as a Kaikai Kiki trademark and silkscreened onto handbags and t-shirts to be purchased in museum shops and online stores. The flowers then become characters that function similarly to his other characters, such as DOB. Yoshitake observes, "Murakami's production of DOB comes from an engagement with how an icon emerges as an object of mass consumption and circulates as a distinctive registered trademark to be used, reused, bought, and sold." (in Schimmel 2007, 125) Fusing the supposedly opposing realms of commercial culture and fine art practice, Murakami, like his 1960s Pop art predecessor, uses these consumerist design codes to communicate to his Superflat generation.

### **3.3. Two-Faced: Murakami and the Double-Edged Sword**

It isn't a novel idea, let me tell you... it's delusional to think that he's the next Warhol. He's playing by the rules. Warhol changed them. Warhol changed the way we see the world. Murakami is simply living in Warhol-land. (Saltz in Brand 2003, n.p.)

One turning point in Murakami's career was the explosive moment when Miss Ko2 (Figure 3.11) sold at auction for 567,500 U.S. dollars at Christie's New York in May 2003. For Japanese art historians and curators, it meant that art derived from manga and Japanese popular culture had been approved by the international art world. (Sunhee 2004, 68) Murakami himself boasted of his financial success in America and even proudly announced the sale on his website, seemingly completely unaware, or at least unconcerned, by the critical expectation that artists must not concern themselves with the financial or business side of things. Their artistic practice *should* be about coming up with ideas and creating works to represent them, leaving the sales and monetary figures to be dealt with by the dealers, auction houses and gallerists. Murakami would have no such restraint, and this is one of the reasons that critics find themselves situated on either side of the debate. It is this

struggle that brings the definition of art into question and thus presents the division between high and low art. Murakami's art, however, falls into both categories, yet he emphasises the difference in the conception of these categories as lacking relevance in Japanese culture: "I make art that isn't about high culture versus low culture. Our reality is that everything is visual culture." (Murakami in Griffin 2001, 188) This statement specifically reinforces the notion that there is an absence of a differentiation between low and high, but additionally instigates the idea that this concept of elimination of hierarchical divisions within the art world is the reality of the present postmodern society. Therefore, the fusion of these binaries is a postmodern concept, as opposed to the simplified idea that high and low concepts were a Western import to art in Japan, or that Japanese do not see or make a distinction between art and craft, or art and entertainment. Furthermore, the hierarchical distinction was a modern invention, rather than simply, or solely, a Western interpretation that was imported to Japan.



3.11. *Miss Ko2*, 1998  
Takashi Murakami  
Oil paint, acrylic, synthetic resin, fiberglass and iron  
100" x 46" x 36"  
Collection of Marianne Boesky, New York



Seemingly moments after the Christie's auction, within the same year that *Miss Ko2* sold for over half a million dollars, the distinction became even blurrier. Japanese toy maker Takara and Kaikai Kiki released a product in 2003, one Japanese commonly refer to as “toy confection.” Murakami's plastic figurines, known collectively as *Super Flat Museum*, were initially rather cheap, and each pack includes two pieces of chewing gum and a miniature replica of one of Murakami's works. However, the ten items in the series were available for sale in a limited edition of 300,000 pieces (30,000 of each figure). Each piece is numbered and comes with a certificate that identifies it. In an act of clever marketing gluttony, Murakami has kept the identity of the toys a secret by packaging them in identically printed boxes, so the purchaser will not know specifically what they have purchased until he or she opens the package. This ploy often results in each buyer making multiple purchases, as they try to attain the object of their desire. Included among the toys is a replica of the famous figure, Miss Ko2, and by doing so, Murakami made both the object of desire and the simulacra. Murakami says, “I am so happy to deliver my art to these ordinary people in the form of toys.” (Mitsubishi Corporation 2003, n.p.)



3.12. *Super Flat Museum (Convenience Store Edition)*, 2003  
set of 10 miniature figures by Murakami and Kaiyōdō  
Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Murakami's art practice sympathises with the new generation, and he stands up to criticism with a level of honesty that adds to his appeal in the contemporary art world. This characteristic of outright candor is perhaps one way that Murakami can be credited with an original contribution to the art world by participating in and furthering the new business art of which Warhol formulated. Like its Pop art predecessor, Superflat art conveys the relationship between art and commodity, and Murakami is openly frank about his approach, which is “not so much to think collectively about Pop Art as to create *art products*.” (italics added) (Murakami in Kelmachter 2002b, n.p.) Warhol's repetition of imagery disturbed the widely held modernist view of originality, and his injection of consumer culture into the fine art of painting broke the perception of a clear division between art and commerce. Murakami's *Super Flat Museum*, when viewed as a single coherent work, presents a combination and real fusion of art and product.



3.13. *Super Flat Museum*, 2008  
Display at *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* exhibition at Tate Modern, 2009  
Photo the author

Murakami's work is frequently labeled as shallow entertainment with an uncertain future or significance in the history of art. Saltz claims that Murakami does not extend,



expand, or improve on Warhol's Pop, accusing Murakami of "simply living in Warhol land." (in Brand 2003, n.p.) He claims that Murakami's work lacks the depth of 1960s American Pop: "Surface is everything to Murakami. It's all there is." (Saltz 1999, 65) However, in a world of fast-paced global consumerism lacking expectations of intellectual depth, shallowness can be seen as a poignant and valid point and perhaps even a critical perspective.

Although they also benefit from Pop techniques and celebrity-style branding, popular western artists like American Jeff Koons and British Damien Hirst largely manage to escape this level of biting criticism. It is apparent in the following excerpt that Murakami's Japanese identity plays a role in the attack, and the presumptuous-ness of the assertion that Murakami's ideas lack originality and must have been borrowed directly from Warhol is highlighted:

I don't know if you're allowed to say this, but like a lot of contemporary Japanese artists, Murakami is a craftmaster-whiz of flawless visual effects... Murakami's lack of depth may be dazzling, but his essential vision of this world of surface is fairly clinched and immature. His ideas about sex, consumerism, and fantasy – especially in recent works – have a dated familiarity. If you want substance or meaning, you're braking up the wrong show. You will leave here empty, irked at Murakami's 'boyishness,' his hackneyed ideas about sensuality, his imitations of Warhol, and his ironic lack of imagination... You should look at Murakami's art shamelessly, celebrate its seductiveness and clarity, and even adore it. But also hope that he stops trying so hard to make art. In spite of his nod to popular culture, Murakami has fallen far behind it. Too satisfied with too little, his fatal attraction to the art world keeps him returning to the surface. He's forgotten that surface is a thousand miles deep. (Saltz 1999, 65)

The politics of cultural identity are inherent in Murakami's work, and the superficial surface of Superflat is a terrain of complexity marked by both a layering of identities and a flattening of (but not absence of) hierarchical divisions between fine art and commercial culture.



3.14. *Oval Buddha*, 2007  
Aluminum and platinum leaf  
568 x 319 x 310 cm  
Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles

Murakami explores his cultural identity and life as an artist in a recent series of self-portraits, which includes a monumental aluminum sculpture, *Oval Buddha* (Figure 3.14). The character has a single head with two faces: one is sleeping, and one could be either yawning or laughing. The familiar motif of multiple eyes is visible at the base of the sculpture, and as discussed in Chapter Two, they appear to be confused and overworked in their ability to see a great deal from many angles, yet in a state of constant action. In Buddhism the combination of open and closed mouths is called “a-un” and is common feature of Buddhist gate guardians, wherein one has an open mouth and the other has a closed mouth. (Watanabe 2010, n.p.) The sleeping head is propped by an aging body at the top of a lotus flower base. An elephant symbol stands for regeneration, and a pearl inlay is derived from design features of Japan's national treasures. (Yoshitake 2007b, n.p.)

### **3.4. The Elimination of the Original: Postmodernism and Globalisation**

Baudrillard states that “the aura of our world is no longer sacred, but one of absolute merchandise.” (1996, 28) Interestingly, Baudrillard was fascinated with Japanese culture. Behind each industrial object and artificial product, Baudrillard points out in his essay, *A Perfect Crime*, the Japanese intuit a deity, and there is a mischievous spirit, hidden, “sniggering at us.” (1996, 28) That mischievous trickster to whom he refers is a “brilliant scenographer” who has lured the world into this state. Perhaps, in this context, Murakami can be seen as the trickster, mischievous spirit or god; his art is the merchandise, and the viewer a fascinated victim. The relentless pursuit of “the indifference and equivalence of mercantile value” transforms the artwork into “absolute merchandise.” (1996, 28)

Matsui claims that Murakami’s work reveals the desire to adore or worship, and this desire is directed toward “not the true deity, but its simulacrum, among contemporary Japanese youth.” (Matsui 2007, 37) If simulacrum refers to the copy whose original is unattainable, then it is the simulacra that replace the object of desire and become the objects to be attained. The copy is not an empty vacuous object, as it makes reference to concepts beyond its form. With the prices for Murakami’s sculptures climbing into the multi-million dollar range, his mass-produced toys are the simulacra that the audience can obtain. In his essay, *Absolute Merchandise*, Baudrillard cites Warhol as going “the farthest” in art and commerce. (Baudrillard 1995, 112) In today’s transcultural context, however, Murakami might be taking it further than Baudrillard could have imagined.

Postmodernism can provide a theoretical approach in studying the relations between art and product in the context of post-capitalism. To Baudrillard, much of modern art is based on the disappearance of meaning, and he suggests an ironic proposal: “[art should] fight alienation with its own weapons,” thus objectifying art into absolute merchandise, which is “more mercantile than merchandise itself.” (1995, 119) The art object takes the form of

absolute merchandise, losing its ideal nature. The desire to repossess that ideal nature, Baudrillard argues, would deny the art object merchandise form, and merchandise is the foundation of modernity. (1995, 119) Can this pure form of absolute merchandise transcend the cheap connotations of commercialism? Murakami attributes the desire to infuse a “soul” in his artwork to his disciplined and detailed process of producing art:

I am extremely attentive to all aspects of the process: not letting a single detail slip by in my quest to imbue works with a true soul.  
(Murakami 2010, n.p.)

Murakami’s idea that attention to detail is, probably decidedly, can be viewed as a non-Western and specifically Japanese concept. Murakami also believes that the acceptance of the idea that art and merchandise can be on the same level “is more evolved in Japan.” (Murakami 2010, n.p.) Although the concept of high culture in the art world still persists, and the boundary between high and low has not collapsed entirely in any part of the world, the relationship between fine art and commercial production can no longer be located according to the hierarchical divisions and binaries of modernism. Art can no longer rely on aesthetic value alone or inherent transcendent qualities to privilege its place in society. Furthermore, within this context of globalisation, Superflat can be seen as a new negotiation of aesthetic value and serve as a model for which other alternative modes of artistic production can be developed.

Azuma discusses his “database” model in relation to Baudrillard’s “hyperreality” and the situation Benjamin describes as the loss of aura after the disappearing of the original art object. He claims that previous postmodern theories failed to understand or recognise that the previous model did not collapse, but was simply replaced, or overcome, by the database model. He uses otaku culture to demonstrate the database and how it functions in a world composed of simulacra:

Otaku culture is filled with derivative works, originals and derivative works are produced and consumed as if they were of

"equal value"... underneath the simulacra exists a database, a device that sorts good simulacra from bad ones regulating the flow of derivative works... Over the past twenty years a consumer behaviour that does not discriminate between these two categories has been gaining more and more power. (Azuma 2009, 60-1)

Sylvère Lotringer makes reference to a similar, albeit less optimistic, idea of such a database:

"The 'end of art,' so often trumpeted, never happened. It was replaced instead by unrestrained proliferation and cultural overproduction." (2005a, 19) Globalisation, according to Lotringer, has caused an utterly catastrophic loss of vision. (2005b, 77)

For Baudrillard, Pop art has become a form of merchandise, and by doing so, the art object loses its ideal nature of beauty, thereby also losing its authenticity (and becoming ironic).

[Pop art] signifies the end of perspective, the end of evocation, the end of witnessing, the end of the creative gesture and, not least of all, the end of the subversion of the world and of the malediction of art. Not only is its aim the immanence of the "civilized" world, but its total integration in this world." (quoted in Taylor, 181)

It is too late now to know for sure whether Baudrillard would have shown any of the same excitement in Murakami's production as he did with Warhol, but it can be stated that Baudrillard embraced Warhol for his ability to replicate a machine and turn commodity into art (e.g. *Brillo Boxes*). The art was then re-commodified as art, and all that is left for contemporary art to do is "to reinvent itself as art." (Baudrillard 2005, 77) Murakami demonstrates the exact flipside of this process of commodity-turned-art, by putting fine art into the market (e.g. *SUPERFLAT MUSEUM*), then reabsorbing the commercial product into the fine art context (e.g. the Louis Vuitton monogram). Considering that Baudrillard believed that the majority of contemporary art is simply striving for "nullity" and emptiness, and that it is already both, Murakami would likely fall into this majority category where "artists [other than Warhol] only have a commercial strategy," which is "worse than nothing, because it means nothing and it nonetheless exists." (Baudrillard 2005, 28) In the

introduction to one of Baudrillard's latest texts, *The Conspiracy of Art*, Lotringer sees the current state of art as unsurprising given Baudrillard's previous predictions:

Pop Art's "cool smile" was no different from commercial complicity. By now this collusion is affecting society at large and there is no more reason to consider art apart from the rest... Art now offers career benefits, rewarding investments, glorified consumer products, just like any other corporation. *And everything else is becoming art.* (Lotringer in Baudrillard 2005, 11)

In his 1998 publication, *The End of the Art World*, Robert C. Morgan sees the contemporary post-Pop art world as a seductive illusion that will not only last, but will accelerate well into the twenty-first century. He calls this the "post-Warholian nightmare" (1998, XVII) and claims that conceptual strategies are employed in order to substantiate a discourse for the spectacle of the market, with no interest in either ideas or quality. Morgan believes that what was once a community of artists, connoisseurs and truly creative people, is now a "detached network of subscribers," and suggests that skepticism is vital when viewing the works of contemporary market-oriented artists (1998, 5). However, he still admits that it is through this kind of kitsch that we are beginning to examine our globalized culture with renewed critical and dialectical perspective. But he warns that, "without offering resistance to the conditioning effects of corporate culture, it sells, but has no lasting impact beyond the titillation of the spectacle." (1998, XVII)

Morgan expresses disappointment that rather than resisting the rhetoric of marketing and publicity and "the most nonthinking aspect of information culture," artists are putting themselves in competition with the "most superficial entertainment media," such as advertising. (1998, XVII) He believes that the artist's role is as a cultural force, to comment and effect change in society and that this desire was lost with the engagement in deconstruction due to the emphasis on postmodernism, resulting in the complete loss of relevance to or interest in aesthetics, the destruction of moral responsibility and impulse for

resistance toward consumerism or capitalism. He presents a challenge to artists to rejuvenate the aura in art, which would thereby reinvigorate creative impulse.

I would argue that to be an artist in the most fundamental sense is ultimately a task of liberation. This is to suggest that to be an artist in the international sense is not simply about marketing one's logo, but is about maintaining a certain ethical relationship to art. It is about positioning oneself in opposition to the assumption that the information network carries its own "natural" momentum and will automatically improve life... Art must be willing to resist what Barthes designated as "the fashion system" or it will gradually deconstruct itself under the guise of political slogans and social codes. (Morgan 1998, 8)

On the other hand, in *Beyond the Brillo Box*, Arthur C. Danto calls this period in art since the 1960s, the "Post-Historical Period," and sees no reason for it to ever come to an end. He indicates that we have reached a new art-historical phase in which "art can be externally dictated to, in terms of either fashion and or politics, but internal dictation by the pulse of its own history is now a thing of the past." (Danto 1992, 9) This idea of history being exterminated fits right in with Murakami's original Superflat concept, which states that there is "no real history" (Murakami in Kaplan 2001, 97), although the intention of this 1997 statement was perhaps more a provocation than an actual submission when considering the early point in the Superflat movement during which it occurred. Danto presents a more sympathetic view than that of Morgan to the dilemma faced by contemporary artists, as he sees this loss of history and loss narrative as an irreplaceable "thing of the past." (1992, 10-11) He offers a glimmer of hope in that, even though the role and meaning of art is decreasingly clear, art can transform itself:

So we are witnessing, as I see it, a triple transformation - in the making of art, in the institutions of art, in the audience for art. All this takes place where the reasons for making art have themselves been undergoing change, making the present moment as exciting as it is ill defined. (Danto 1992, 12)

"With his uncanny ability to mirror his culture [Murakami] is more equivalent of Andy Warhol than someone intent on critiquing things." (Cruz 1999, 14) This statement must

first presume that Warhol was never critical toward popular culture and, secondly, that Murakami's work acts as a mirror to "his [Japanese] culture." One could argue, however, that Warhol's "ability to mirror his culture" exposed anxiety and fear, coldness and detachment. Ambivalence, on Murakami's part, may also be viewed as a critical stance. Despite the claim that his work, like Pop, mirrors contemporary life, Murakami's work is full of fantasy and imagination. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality (1994, 12), in which society is in a passive state of consumption, is extended with Murakami's work. The similarities between the two artists, Warhol and Murakami, are not only found in the lack of internal critique, but in the question of whether their work is a celebration or critique of the popular culture of their times. There is evidence in the cases of both artists that supports either view.

Murakami's brand identity is symbolic in relation to Benjamin's concept of the aura in relation to the original object. The persona of the artist becomes embedded in the serial productions, such as the figurines and t-shirts. For Benjamin, the existence of the original work of art is the prerequisite for authenticity. This authenticity occupies a singular space that cannot be shared with a reproduction or copy. Therefore, mechanical reproduction eliminates the aura of the art object. At the same time, in the context of the age of mass production, the aura of the original becomes even more valuable because of the existence of copies, as the original object contains the sole existence of the aura, which is increased by the simple production of the copies.

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition, which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. (Benjamin 1935/6, n.p.)

Benjamin also points out that mechanical reproduction facilitates mass participation, which



allows the larger audience a new role in the critical evaluation of the work. Therefore, the process of mechanical reproduction, while attributing the aura to the original, also challenges the elitist positions of those who formerly maintained exclusive access to the original art object.

As previously stated, Murakami sees himself as having a similar role in his artistic productions as does a director of films. At the same time, he presents himself as a celebrity, and he frequently encourages the accompaniment of photographs of himself and the Kaikai Kiki artists in the press and in publications. He plays to the camera with a clever smile, often dressed as one of his own sculptural artworks or other overstated attire. In his essay, Benjamin addresses the aura of the film star as an artificial replacement for the genuine aura of the original:

The film responds to the shrivelling [sic] of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of personality," the phoney [sic] spell of a commodity. (1935/6, n.p.)

The process of image production and reproduction in Murakami's work highlights the continuously expanding role of celebrity-culture in the media and art worlds, revealing that this process is a tool for artists to gain status across a range of platforms. Murakami's ability to exploit the culture of celebrity to expand his cultural capital surpasses both Koons and Warhol by spreading his selling power across a range of fields to include fashion and animation.

Warhol's work provided a juxtaposition of art and consumerism, archiving a period of American popular culture, which propagated new questions. Baudrillard discounts the presence of subversion in Pop art of the 1960s, revealing its analytical function:

Quite logically, it has nothing to do with subversive, aggressive humour, with the telescoping of surrealist objects. It is no longer a question of short-circuiting objects in their function, but one of juxtaposing them to analyse relations between them. (Baudrillard

1998, 121)

He also argues that the reading of subversion is actually a form of nostalgia for art to be critical. (Baudrillard 2001, 144) With the *Brillo Boxes*, Warhol wanted to make art that looked the same as the consumer product, but the art did not imitate or produce the same function. Murakami, however, takes the process further by making commercial products that are regarded as the same as art and vice versa. By including his commercial creations in his exhibitions, Murakami not only juxtaposes art and consumer culture, he produces them. Rather than appropriating the Louis Vuitton logo, “he is actually working for the company.” (Mattick 2004, 107)

Warhol also worked for designers and department store brands prior to his success as an artist with gallery representation at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. The current situation is such that artists of Murakami’s generation find themselves in a position where marketing and artistic ability are at least equally important in finding success in the art world. Curator Amada Cruz believes that this is symptomatic of late twentieth century post-capitalism: “Murakami’s uncritical stance toward capitalism is perhaps typical of his generation.” (1999, 16) This statement deems criticism and resistance of consumerism futile and does not suggest a challenge or interrogation of this apparent surrender. However, it is not difficult to locate the element of critique with Murakami’s work as being that of his own cultural roots within the Americanised Japanese society in which he grew up, which is ultimately a critique of consumer society. His own identity is saturated in the back and forth exchange of cultural products and visual information, and his practice employs a critical awareness of the internalization associated with postwar Americanisation.

The noted gallery owner who represents Murakami in New York, Marianne Boesky says, “Murakami’s work has so many layers in art history that it has become hard for critics to dismiss it.” (Wilson-Goldie 2001, 119) On the contrary, as acknowledged in Chapter One,

the original criteria of Superflat is that it has no "real" history. (Kaplan 2001, 97) According to Murakami, "Tokyo has been eliminating its traces of history one after another. That's the Tokyo which I simultaneously love and hate." (Knox 2004, 52) Thus, the art form is a metaphor for the city of Tokyo, which is a metaphor for today's Japanese culture and society and the mentality of 'destroy in order to rebuild.' This Tokyo is an urban machine that runs on trends and novelty to survive and continue production. Amada Cruz suggests that Japanese society is made up of copies, images with no original. All that is left is the signifier. She offers the Ise Shrine as an example. (1999, 17) The Ise Grand Shrine (or Ise Jingū, located in the city of Ise, Japan) is entirely reconstructed every twenty years. It is actually a group of shinto shrines, and it is the shinto belief in the death and renewal of nature, the impermanence of all objects, and as a way of passing on building techniques through generations.<sup>28</sup> This practice is accompanied by celebratory festival, preceded by years of preparation by local craftsmen. Although the Ise Shrine is technically a copy of the original, it is considered no less authentic, and therefore it retains its essence as an ancient shrine. This is reinforced by the fact that the architectural style is used only for the purpose of the Ise Shrine's reconstruction, which is not practiced or duplicated anywhere else.

The loss of the original (eliminating history) presents one of many opportunities to look at Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal: the simulation and the substitute for the real that no longer exists. Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal indicates that the division between reality and representation has imploded, resulting in the post-capitalist condition where everything is a simulation. There is no way to differentiate an original from a copy; therefore, everything is a copy. Baudrillard then argues that, despite the reading of subversion, we are in fact nostalgic for criticality in contemporary art. (2001, 144)

Murakami's role as the creative director, as in the director of a film (like one of his

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<sup>28</sup> The next scheduled rebuilding of Ise Shrine is in 2013. Source: Official Ise Jingū website: <<http://www.isejingu.or.jp/english/isemairi/isemairi.htm>>

stated influences, Steven Spielberg), as well as the president or CEO of his corporation, which has been developed with the help of close examination of the life of Bill Gates, implicates contemporary art in a new wave of artists-turned-celebrity and reconfigures the role of an artist as a businessman, without erasing their status as an artist. The Kaikai Kiki Company participates in and expands upon the Warholian concept of "business art," while also demonstrating an engagement with the Japanese history of the art-studio system and the relationship of master-student, wherein Murakami emphasises the value afforded to technical skill and reproduction, or copying, in Japanese art. The reproduction of motifs and characters also connects Murakami's work to the history of copying in Japanese art history. Although Western critics do not value the skill of copying in the same way that the Japanese appreciate this heritage, and Western modernism tends to focus on the importance of originality as a virtue, Murakami reminds the art world that the concept of copying is connected to the acquisition of skills, perfecting of technique and the potential of learning through imitation.

#### **4. CONSUMPTION, DESTRUCTION AND REDEMPTION**

I have learned in Europe and America the way of the fine art scene. Few people come to museums. Much bigger are movie theaters... the [museum] space is like old-style media. That's why I am really interested in making merchandise for ordinary people. (Murakami in Marks 2001, B5)

##### **4.1. Fashion Fusions: 'Eye Love Superflat' and the Louis Vuitton Project**

When I first saw Takashi Murakami's work, I smiled and wondered, where did this explosion come from? Who was responsible for this collision of psychedelia, manga and, well, art? Then I thought, I would love it if the mind that imagined this dizzying world of jellyfish eyes, singing moss, magic mushrooms and morphing creatures would be willing to have a go at the iconic Louis Vuitton monogram. (Jacobs 2008, n.p.)

Though it is clear that not everyone in the professional art world agrees where the art ends and the commerce begins, or if the distinction even matters, if there ever was a tangible boundary between fine art and commercial production, Murakami's unique brand of identifying himself as an artist and subsequently (and unhesitatingly) crossing over into the worlds of fashion, music and animation, is a sign of previously unmatched elasticity. His international success took him nearly to the point of celebrity status in both East and West, and although, in many ways, the cultural binary division remains intact, Murakami can be seen as a kind of flexible tension bridge, connecting the worlds of art with popular culture in the twenty-first century.

As established in Chapter Three, Murakami follows a Pop art lineage of manipulation of the media and a business-like control over production. Additionally, his production processes demonstrate an artistic freedom of which Koons describes in the following quote taken from an interview in the early 1990s:

Art is communication - it is the ability to manipulate people. The difference between it and show business or politics is only that the artist is freer. More than anyone else, he is able to keep everything from the idea through the production to the sales point - in his

own control. It is only a matter of knowing how to use the right approach at the right moment. (Koons in Muthesius 1992, 80)

By acknowledging the collusion of art with traditionally commercial fields of fashion and design, such work conceives of a future for artists within the complex socio-economic landscape of late capitalism into the twenty-first century. As artists like Murakami flagrantly participate in commercial practices, consideration must be given to the question of the role of the artist today, who, in this case, has control of every facet of his organization and his projects, including the licensing and sale of any related merchandise in the museum shop. Contrary to Western avant-garde ideals, but right in line with neo-Pop banality, Murakami is making commercial culture work for him and sharing this wealth with a new generation of contemporary artists, who he 'discovers' at his bi-annual art fair, GEISAI, and 'raises' through his Kaikaikiki Corporation. He claims, "Art is not universal, but more like a fashion with a little longer life span." (Itoi 2001a, 134)

Murakami suggests introducing art to the masses by making his art resemble the already popular and desired items of popular culture.

It is not common for many Japanese people to purchase and live with a work of art. Even among the younger generation, art enthusiasts are greatly outnumbered by enthusiasts of manga comics, anime and rock music. However, architectural design and interior design have become very popular in the past few years, and contemporary art is considered to be the next trend. As many magazines are now covering art, there are signs of people considering purchasing a work of art. I hope that the *shokugan* figure, which customers may purchase at a convenience store, will become the "starter kit" for their art collection. (Murakami 2003, n.p.)

Murakami wishes to tap into the wide base of numerous consumers of popular culture in order to raise the popularity and expand the market of sales in contemporary art. This begs the question: What happens to art when it is transformed and absorbed into popular or commercial culture? It would be difficult to then distinguish between the art works and the toys in such a collection.

Murakami's initial suggestion in the above excerpt, that it is uncommon for many Japanese to purchase art work, is situated at a potential point of dispute, as the purchase of art has always been limited to a small, most often elite, percentage of those who can afford to purchase art in any population or capitalistic society worldwide. By suggesting that his convenience store figurines could be a "starter kit" for young collectors of art, he is relying on the notion that these figurines would be understood as art, and as such, their purchase would lead the consumer into buying more art works. His idea partly relies on the degradation, or annihilation, of the hierarchical structure of art and commercial culture.

While the otaku and comic fair audiences, as well as the contemporary art establishment of collectors and dealers are mostly male, Murakami recognized in the late nineties that the main buyers, and therefore target consumers, of fashion and pop culture products are teenaged girls and young women:

Now my concept is more pure: I want to make what I like to make.  
Right now the young female audience is the hardest to attract, and the  
challenge of my newest work is to get popular with that group.  
(Murakami in Friis-Hansen 1999, 31)

Murakami's marketing to women and networking across disciplines resulted in the Louis Vuitton commission, as he teamed with high-profile fashion designer Marc Jacobs, Creative Director at Louis Vuitton. The Louis Vuitton commission is a useful example of how Murakami reaches across audiences and also demonstrates the blurring of an art/product dichotomy. Japanese are known the world over to be lovers of famous designer fashion brands, particularly Louis Vuitton. Though its population is not even half as large as that of the United States, Japan consumes forty-one percent of the entire world's luxury goods.<sup>29</sup> The Chairman and Chief Executive of Louis Vuitton's umbrella company (LVMH) describes a further link between Japanese consumer society and the French brand:

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<sup>29</sup> In Tokyo alone, there are twelve Louis Vuitton stores with a total of fifty-four stores throughout Japan. Louis Vuitton's own birthplace, Paris, has only five stores with a total of just sixteen in France. (Jana 2007, n.p.)

Japanese luxury customers are demanding and have an eye for detail. French quality and *savoir faire* resonate very powerfully with them. They respect traditions while remaining future-facing. I believe these are important values that we share. It inspires us to progress [and] to continually improve. We want to offer a unique experience to our customers by allowing them to embrace the entire Louis Vuitton universe in one place. This is the case in our stores. (Carcelle in Jana 2007, n.p.)

Murakami's designs for the Vuitton brand utilise his own artistic iconography of animated flowers with smiling faces and his multiple eyes motif, as well as his re-working of the traditional 'LV' monogram, which was transformed to a more colourful palette. While the handbags were simultaneously embraced by the art and fashion worlds, the dual effect is that design and fashion are considered beyond purely commercial terms and art aesthetics are a vehicle for commercial advertising. Murakami then turned his commercial fame back into his fine art in 2004 with a series of paintings based on the Louis Vuitton monogram designs, which were displayed in galleries and museums.

Murakami's collaborative practice was one that he co-opted, pioneered by previous designers collaborating with artists. For example, Helmut Lang collaborated with conceptual artist Jenny Holzer and sculptor Louise Bourgeois. Carsten Höller worked with Muccia Prada for the Fondazione Prada. Chiho Aoshima also collaborated with Issey Miyake, and her recent sculptural works were based on print ads for the designer. One noticeable difference in the collaboration between Murakami and Louis Vuitton is that Murakami's name itself has expanded to represent a brand in the same way that Louis Vuitton is a brand. The success of the collaboration was previously unparalleled, more than partly because of the surrounding hype created with the release of limited editions and subsequent waiting lists. The results of their collaboration, or the products, are informed by one another's style, with both 'brands' equally saturated by the other's ideas. For example, Murakami's *Eye Love Superflat* series are sold in canvas editions or silkscreen prints of his own reworked LV monogram design, while new Louis Vuitton retail shops across the world are also galleries



exhibiting Murakami's sculptures.



4.1. *Eye Love SUPERFLAT (White)*, 2003  
Takashi Murakami  
Acrylic on canvas mounted on wood  
70 7/8" x 70 7/8"  
Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami

The Louis Vuitton logo appears centrally in Murakami's *Eye Love Superflat* canvas work and represents the commercial connection, while in the context of a handbag, the LV logo functions as part of a decorative pattern (Figure 4.1). Although reinvented by Murakami, the motifs that constitute the print essentially belong to the Louis Vuitton brand. Murakami altered the already existing brand language by changing the colours from the signature brown to a white background and multiple bright colours, rather than beige, design motifs. Murakami's eyeball motif also appears interspersed with the Louis Vuitton logo.

Motivated by Gucci's success with Tom Ford, designer Marc Jacobs contacted Murakami to reinvigorate the classic handbags and add the brighter, more exciting, colour scheme to the monogrammed Louis Vuitton products. Driven by a huge marketing campaign and desire created via limited availability, the bags garnered instant success. In the fall of

2002, thousands of excited consumers lined up all over the world, and even signed their names to waiting lists, to purchase their own luxury Louis Vuitton-label handbags embossed with Murakami's design concepts for prices ranging from \$900 to \$10,000 U.S. dollars. Even the clearly inferior "designer fakes" sold easily for hundreds of dollars and appeared in urban street markets across the world. Murakami was subsequently commissioned to decorate Louis Vuitton stores. With *Eye Love Superflat*, Murakami is able to simultaneously produce commercial products and fine art from the same material.

Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton also provided for the opportunity for Kaikai Kiki to create and produce its first animated feature, *Superflat Monogram*, a five-minute animation featuring a little girl who discovers an old trunk (embossed with the original Louis Vuitton monogram design and colour scheme), falls in and gets lost in an *Alice in Wonderland*-style fantasy world. The animation was shown at galleries, such as Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, and Louis Vuitton stores around the world, and it is also available widely on the internet. The animation reads as an extended commercial advertisement for Louis Vuitton and its new line of products designed by Murakami. This ability to create artistic projects and simultaneously promote his merchandise, his art and himself as an artist is clearly Murakami's unique endowment, or his genius.

The title of his ©MURAKAMI retrospective leaves no room to question that Murakami has used his international recognition and decidedly transformed his name into a brand based on his identity as an artist who engages with art and commodity through mass production and marketing. The identity as an artist becomes centralised as the heading under which all of his activities are identified, thus the conceptual distinction between art and commodity is further challenged, and the idea of the individual artist takes on an aura. This aura can then be transmitted onto anything that the artist produces, thus reinvigorating Benjamin's concept of the aura (1935/6) and reapplying it in the contemporary art context.

This is to suggest that Murakami's deployment of brand identity goes beyond seeking celebrity via the media and actually participates in media production through new channels.

The 2007-2009 ©MURAKAMI exhibition was heavily criticised in the media in the United States for its inclusion of the retail shop selling the full line of Louis Vuitton handbags and products, which was not unanticipated by the exhibition's head curator, who made sure that the non-profit museum did not benefit financially from the presence of the retail shop and kept it separate from the museum's own bookshop. (Schimmel in Morrison 2009, n.p.) Murakami and the Vuitton brand were responsible for the development, finances and staffing of the shop, yet Schimmel felt its inclusion was essential for the exhibition:

Personally, I have no interest in brands; I'm kind of the anti-brand. But I understood how important [Murakami's] erasure of the space between high and low, between commercial art and fine art, was. That was essential to understanding Murakami... and I was wrestling with, how do you do that? You can talk about it; you can write about it; you can take pictures of it; but the best way to do it is to have people experience it, in a very meaningful way. And a way that really represents the artist is experiencing the shop itself... [I took] a lot of crap for doing it. (Schimmel in Morrison 2009, n.p.)



4.2. Louis Vuitton Retail Shop in ©MURAKAMI exhibition, 2007  
The Geffen Contemporary, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
Photograph © and courtesy of Eric Nakamura

Murakami's brand identity, like the Louis Vuitton label, can be used as a marker for authenticity of his work. With the presence of the copyright symbol, which has now in turn replaced the idea of the artist's signature, can be said to have the new concept of the "aura." The products have higher value, because they are products of Murakami's brand, and the products of Murakami's brand are linked to the artist and the individual. Therefore, Benjamin's concept of the aura can be reconfigured as the artist's identity, reproduced by branding, and projected onto objects. According to Jacobs, "[The collaboration] had the spirit and presence of Takashi and the history of Vuitton." (Murakami 2007, n.p.) The corporate brand can be considered as a universal language, wherein logos are understood symbolically through their recognised connections to products, activities and meanings representing the aims and identity of the corporation. By functioning as a brand, the artist communicates through a system of signs similar to the corporate model to reach a global audience.

The value of an "original" object can be inscribed to the "authentic" handbags via the presence of forgeries. Murakami cleverly highlighted this potential by setting up a "fake" urban market-type stall outside of the Brooklyn Museum for the opening of his ©MURAKAMI exhibition. Many attendees assumed that the handbags were fakes, and the originals were available in the museum for purchase in the more legitimate Louis Vuitton retail shop within the exhibition. The reality was that all of the handbags, outside or within, were in fact authentic Louis Vuitton products, introducing a challenging rethinking of previous cultural codes and signifiers. This variation on the exhibition of art presents a remarkable opportunity to reconfigure the ways in which art is viewed and consumed. It reveals the potential for different audiences to participate, as well as extending the occasions for the overlapping of modes of consumption.

The exhibition of the Louis Vuitton "works" in ©MURAKAMI raises the question: Is fashion art? Fashion expresses characteristics traditionally associated with art, such as the obvious emphasis on visual aesthetics, as well as social and political concerns. The fashion world also relies on the individual creator's vision and its history has its own movements. Furthermore, Louis Vuitton goods can be seen as possessing an exclusivity that parallels that of fine art. In a Superflat world, artists move seamlessly through multiple roles. Murakami is a businessman and C.E.O., international curator and artist with a PhD in traditional Japanese painting. Aya Takano is a fine artist who is also known as a science fiction critic. Tokyo-based Chiho Aoshima is a successful and skilled illustrator with no academic fine arts training. Aoshima's work is created entirely in Adobe Illustrator and printed out on giant printers. It has the visual appeal and seduction of advertising and often appears outside of galleries and as public art. The display of fashion in department stores is already similar to the gallery setting, and fashion has also been displayed in museum collections. Murakami is not the first artist to take notice: Warhol made the observation in his 1985 publication *America*, a thought-provoking and comedic commentary on American culture, "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums." (Warhol 1985, 43) According to one of Murakami's early critical supporters in Tokyo, Noi Sawaragi, "This back and forth doesn't seem unnatural to us [Japanese]. We have a history of museums with department stores as a venue. It was thanks to the Seibu [Department Store] Museum that I developed my knowledge of contemporary art. I saw Marcel Duchamp, Malevich and Man Ray in depth for the first time." (Lubow 2005, n.p.) With fashion designers collaborating with artists and artists wearing and designing fashion, the worlds are increasingly intermixed. The relationship comes full circle when one considers that the Louis Vuitton signature flower

monogram, created in 1896, was informed by Japanese design.<sup>30</sup>

Murakami circulates his artwork in the West through the conventional institutions of art, primarily galleries and auctions houses, whereas in Japan his Superflat work was initially disseminated via established commercial modes, such as comic markets, and more recently through his handbag designs and store installations with Louis Vuitton. At the same time, he is an established figure in the contemporary Japanese art scene and is frequently published in the art magazine *Bijutsu Techo*. Therefore, his position as an artist in Japan is established, yet he exploits commercial contexts to further expose his works. The activities are not separate entities, as the audiences overlap in certain networks, creating a merge between the supposedly separate areas. The Louis Vuitton logo is inserted into Murakami's work as much as the artist's work becomes a part of the luxury brand's product collection. The idea of this fusion of commercial enterprise is represented by the telling copyright symbol (©), which precedes his name in the retrospective exhibition title, as well as the commercial functionality of his art production company, Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. Murakami's desire to create a bridge between young consumers and the world of fine art is demonstrated by collaborations with anime and manga creators, galleries and museums, designer fashion houses, celebrity figures, filmmakers and musicians.

The collaborative nature of art, fashion, and business practice has been demonstrated by artists throughout the twentieth century. Warhol began his art career by illustrating fashion advertisements and designing department store window displays, as did Salvador Dali. Picasso and Matisse both designed textiles for British manufacturers after the war. Designers Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli drew inspiration from modern art movements, while Surrealists branched out into fashion and cinema. While formally, fashion has usually been considered secondary to visual art, a potential challenge to this hierarchal structure can

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<sup>30</sup> International exhibitions, during which decorative art from Japan was displayed, were held in Paris in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900, where Georges Vuitton (founder of the Louis Vuitton brand) lived at the time.

be seen through collaborations like what Murakami now refers to as his “Louis Vuitton Project” and what Marc Jacobs calls "a monumental marriage of art and commerce... one for both the fashion and art history books." (Murakami 2007, n.p.)

The question of whether or not art can be a product and vice versa has been discussed previously within this thesis and is often debated within academic discourse, yet to suggest that fashion is interchangeable with art would be considered unacceptable, and even intolerable, by the art world today. Nonetheless, fashion and art are often compared as separate entities with some commonalities, and collaborations between artists and fashion designers are now commonplace. For example, the 1996 Biennale di Firenze (Florence Biennial) was inspired by the relationship between art and fashion and resulted in a large exhibition called *Art/Fashion* at The Guggenheim Museum Museum SoHo in New York, which explored artists throughout the twentieth century who have used fashion and clothing as a medium.

Fashion's vocabulary involves many of the same elements that go into art; there are questions of visions, craft, materials, cut, color, etcetera. Like art, fashion can be looked at anthropologically, sociologically, and even philosophically. It is an expression of individual and collective desire. It is a barometer of change. It involves issues of identity and sexuality. It engages with, and even stimulates, technology, science and business. (Celant *et al.* 1996, 11).

In the history of fashion, encounters with art have usually been limited to a designer having seen and been "inspired" by a painting or an art movement. In the history of art, many artists have either come to use fashion as a subject for their art or fashion objects, such as clothing, as a medium for their work. Man Ray and Dali formed exchanges with fashion designers and worked with photography in the 1930s, which was radical and avant-garde at the time. Punk artist Linder Sterling, whose designs were printed on dresses by British fashion designer Richard Nicoll, points out that, “in other cultures, at other times, no one

batted an eyelid if an artist designed a backdrop for a ballet, then a tea service.” (quoted in Flynn 2009, n.p.)

In the 1980s and 1990s, many artists translated their artistic sensibilities into projects with fashion designers, as revealed in the *Art/Fashion* exhibition catalogue:

Today art and fashion hold up a mirror, where each can sparkle in its own right, or seek to find a reflection in the other's activity. The encounters and collaborations between Tony Cragg and Karl Lagerfeld, Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst, Jil Sander and Mario Merz, Oliver Herring and Rei Kawakubo, Roy Lichtenstein and Gianni Versace, Azzedine Alaïa and Julian Schnabel, Jenny Holzer and Helmut Lang, move within the tradition of the historic avant-gardes. They are the closing of a circle, one that reopens with infinite questions about the future of art as well as fashion. (Asbaghi in Celant 1996, 39)

Murakami has introduced another combination, or reopened this circle. Jacobs believes that their collaboration is the zeitgeist of society and says, “I think what it showed the art world and the fashion world was that we, together, could create the landscape of this actual world that we live in.” (Murakami 2007, n.p.) Murakami’s collaboration with Jacobs moves in a new direction, creating a more complete relationship between the two worlds and forming an interesting cycle of inspiration and innovation between mutually creative muses. The monogram design becomes the subject of his paintings. The relationship becomes the subject of an animation shown at Louis Vuitton shops as well as fine art galleries, which is an advertisement for the Louis Vuitton brand. Simultaneously, Murakami's colourful monogram design for the handbags also comes to symbolise Murakami's own brand.

Japanese are known the world over to be lovers of famous designer fashion brands, particularly Louis Vuitton from France. The magnitude of interest in the brand can be seen by looking at the amount of Louis Vuitton stores in Japan. As of summer 2006, there were twelve Louis Vuitton stores in Tokyo and fifty throughout Japan. (Fukuda in Lutum 2006, 295-6) Compare this figure to Louis Vuitton's own birthplace, Paris, and its five stores in the total of just sixteen throughout France. (Louis Vuitton website) The success of such a



collaboration thus comes as little surprise, as Murakami's focused planning results in an audience of "collectors" ranging from high school students to high profile art dealers.

Recognizable fashion brands, interpreted as status symbols around the globe, have become perhaps the most fluid cultural currency in the world. In Japan the display of branded clothing and accessories takes on almost messianic fervor, and has arguably spawned the recent fad of excessive label consciousness among top-level designers themselves. It is a process one would call superflattening, as the essence of the coveted object - in this case a brand-name dress or purse - is transformed through hype and consumer demand into a stylized graphic object that is almost nothing but brand." (Darling 2001b, 83)

Though Murakami is certainly not the first and surely will not be the last artist to put his artwork on a handbag or other luxury fashion item and work with a celebrity on a music video or CD covers, his "no holds barred" method of production, collaboration and exhibition of the results of these endeavors is unparalleled by any previous artist. Many critics view this unhindered approach as an easy way to success that can (and will) be matched just as effortlessly - and trumped. In an article in the NY Observer in 2008, during the Brooklyn Museum tour of the ©MURAKAMI Retrospective, a contributor writes:

He makes deals with the likes of Mr. Vuitton because he knows that significant artists have their day in contemporary culture and that fashion is forever. In a few years or so, some savvy operator will exploit adolescence with a similar showman-like immediacy and upstage Mr. Murakami. (Naves 2008)

This view looks at the Louis Vuitton collaboration as a "deal" and implies that Murakami is a manipulative businessman or a status-hungry pseudo-celebrity, poised to pounce upon and "exploit" anyone who is naive enough to buy or want his product (or image). This critique recalls Searle's Serpentine Gallery review of Murakami's solo exhibition, as quoted previously in the Introduction, which likens the artist to Kostabi and implies that Murakami and his supporters are either uncritical youths or adolescent-minded adults. Both critics ultimately seek to remove Murakami from the notion of a respectable

artist. Some of the initial critical attacks were later neutralized, as Tim Blum (Murakami's Los Angeles gallerist) pointed out in 2007:

Jerry Saltz is always changing his position. The first review was a clichéd knee-jerk reaction. Of course, years later Saltz took it back and embraced what Takashi was doing. And now, Saltz stabbed Takashi in the heart again because he's become too successful... Collectors think they're so radical for supporting a 'challenging' artist like Paul McCarthy and they feel that the Louis Vuitton collaboration is not radical, but it's fucking punk rock as far as I'm concerned. (Blum in Maerkele 2007, 138)

Murakami expanded his collaborative practice to create a sculptural piece in 2009, *The Simple Things*, which was shown at Art Basel in Switzerland, followed by four other cities in Europe and North America during the exhibition tour of *Pop Life: Art in a Material World*. The sculpture features seven favourite objects, or "simple things," identified by the musician and hip hop producer, Pharrell Williams: a Pepsi can, a bottle of Heinz ketchup, a bag of Doritos brand tortilla chips, condoms, an Ice Cream sneaker, a bottle of Johnson's baby lotion, and a Magnolia Bakery cupcake. Each item is cast in gold and covered in diamonds and jewels by Jacob & Co. The piece sold to a private collector for over \$2 million US dollars within twenty minutes of the opening of Art Basel. (Akhtar 2009, n.p.) *The Simple Things* also appears in *Murakami Versailles* at the Palace of Versailles in France in 2010, presented by Murakami and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

The role of the gallerist in Murakami's western endeavors is crucial to his international presence and success. Murakami's use of the word, Superflat, he attributes, is derived from his American gallerists' description of his work to potential clients:

The word originated in a sales pitch made by two L.A. gallerists [Blum and Poe] to sell my paintings, something like, 'How about this painting? It's super flat, super high quality, and super clean!' I thought I saw a basic truth about Japanese culture in these words, no different from the words that might be used to sell Japanese cars or electronics. If Japanese culture could not transcend this flat surface, it would not achieve respectability as a 'culture'. Thus I launched a project under the rubric of Superflat as a critical endeavour to overcome that sales pitch. (Murakami 2005, 151)

The term “Superflat” is also used to describe flat-screen televisions produced by Japanese brands, such as Sony, Panasonic and Hitachi, and is therefore easily integrated into everyday use in both Japanese and English with little differentiation between the affect.

All of the crossovers between previously distinguishable industries provoke a sense of uneasiness, and sometimes disgust, for many art professionals and critics who frequent fairs and auctions and review the exhibitions. Whether or not all of Murakami’s work meets individual definitions of what constitutes “art”, the activities and products associated with the ©Murakami and Kaikai Kiki brands can certainly be seen as appropriate and fitting for a world of global communication and capitalism run awry. Familiar Pop art debates (and the legacy of Warhol) arise about whether the work is a celebration of commercialism or a critique of contemporary post-capitalist conditions. In either case, the tension and criticism generated continues to affirm the existence of a division between art and product. One Japanese curator has asked about Murakami, “Will he show us the future of art or will he destroy it?” and finds that, “when we are faced with Murakami we can only stand and cry out, ‘I am against being for it.’” (Minami 2001, 63)

#### **4.2. The Function of the Festival: GEISAI Art Fair**

You cannot create an artwork just for yourself, you have to create a scene in which you can work and survive, while letting others continue and elaborate on what you started. I believe that someone who invents a new category and establishes a system for it is always needed—in every age. (Murakami in Matsui, 1998, n.p.)

One of the key activities of Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki Company and its studios is the training and support provided for young artists to produce, exhibit and sell their work regardless of whether or not they have previously received academic training or a formal art education. The GEISAI art fair is a biannual event started in 2002 that brings together

hirable convention-style booths wherein artists can display their work and a cast of acclaimed art world professionals as jurors. Thousands of visitors can browse and “shop” for young talent or art-related merchandise. GEISAI utilizes Murakami’s international success and Kaikai Kiki’s resources as a platform to launch the careers of future generations of artists:

Over the years, I have encountered many hurdles in my path. But in clearing them, I have taken each challenge as an opportunity to expand my dreams and goals. One such hurdle was that in post-war Japan, there was no reliable art market. The art scene existed only as a shallow appropriation of Western trends, or an artificial construction of self-contained hierarchies, unable to support an artist’s career over many years. I realized this when I was a student, and stopped operating within the Japanese art market all together, investing my energies instead into promoting my works overseas. Now that I have seen the results of that endeavor, I am returning to the Japanese market in an attempt to build what was not there originally. The art fair that I organize in Tokyo two times a year, GEISAI, is the product of this new attempt to spur the Japanese art market.<sup>31</sup> (Kaikai Kiki website, n.p.)

Murakami’s “path” places himself in a position of great responsibility in this proposed new construction of the Japanese art market, which, despite the prevailing weakness he identifies as “a shallow appropriation of Western trends,” is in fact based on Western-style trends and hierarchies that he has imported from his own experience in the West. However, the more effective integration of these trends brought back to Japan from overseas within his originally Tokyo-based GEISAI event further demonstrates the potential for hybrid art forms and practices to dominate the international art world, while GEISAI continues to gain momentum and attracts some of the world’s most highly respected dealers, critics, curators and artists to wherever he chooses to locate it.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to supporting, representing, and, as he calls it, “producing for” (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix), young artists through the Kaikai Kiki Company, Murakami’s

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<sup>31</sup> The Kaikai Kiki website contains descriptions of the company within “What is Kaikai Kiki?” and an explanation of its foundation and mission called, “A Message: Laying the Foundation for a Japanese Art Market.” <<http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/message/>>

<sup>32</sup> GEISAI took place first in Tokyo, its regular location, and made its American debut in Miami in 2007 and Taipei in 2009 and 2010. Taiwan has become a potential pool of previously uncultivated talent from East Asia.

GEISAI event is part of his 'campaign of enlightenment,' which has the goal of increasing the profile and consumption of art from the Superflat generation and emerging contemporary artists in Japan. (Murakami 2001b, 145) Murakami believes that, in the case of criticism from those more established "art world people" (in Lisica 2010, Appendix), it is the young people who truly understand his intentions:

The young people understand what I'm doing, which is linking the indigenous fine arts culture to manga and anime, but the establishment treats me as if I'm just trying to be controversial. My point is more pure than that: I'm interested in exploring the confusing times in which we live. (Murakami in Pagel 2001, 190)

GEISAI is presented as offering an alternative to institutional training and gallery distribution, and Murakami has based the format on Japanese comic markets and college art festivals ("GEISAI" means "art festival" in Japanese). It began seeking to pioneer an exciting and fun "place of art" based on the temple school (*terakoya*) educational model from the Edo Period and uses the jury system. The GEISAI website boasts that the event should be "the first art revolution event in the 21st century... determined to keep suggesting guidelines for the development of the art world."<sup>33</sup>

[The model for GEISAI was] very primitive. When I was living in New York City, in 1992-1994. At that moment, I watched a poetry reading at a bookstore. It was a very small bookstore and the audience looked like over 50 people. Some were closing their eyes, and someone was in tears, while someone was reading a poem. This landscape is very shocking for me... We have no idea of something like that culture. *Very* impressive, but, at the same time, very serious stuff! So far away from our [Japanese] culture... but basically I'm very impressed and also my studio neighborhood [in New York] had the Knitting Factory. This live house was very small and everyday doing something, like independent musicians and poetry readings. That was a kind of education for young creators. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

*Comiket*<sup>34</sup> (comic market) launched in 1975 and is held biannually in Tokyo. Over the years it has become the world's largest comic market and regularly attracts nearly half a

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.us.GEISAI.net>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.comiket.co.jp>

million visitors with an interest in the exhibition and sale of self-published materials (*dōjinshi*) centered around manga, anime, video games, and other related genres. A similar biannual event, *Wonder Festival*, was Murakami's preferred choice to exhibit his *Miss Ko2* in 2000. This was due to its smaller size (around 10,000 visitors) and presence of viewers from outside of otaku culture, including musicians and "fashion-conscious people". (Murakami in Matsui, 1998, n.p.) Although "Miss Koko" was generally disliked by Wonder Festival participants, Murakami could harness the same youthful energy by creating a similar style of event for the appreciation (or fandom) of art with his GEISAI idea. The GEISEI audience then develops their interest in and consequently the marketability of contemporary art.

By viewing his audience as customers and then expanding into the realm of the fan, Murakami establishes a loyal following, a strategy that has more in common with Steve Jobs and Apple Computer, Inc. than that of artist Damien Hirst. The strategy works within the current consumer-oriented environment by stimulating the desire by the public to participate in art consumption via the more accessible artist merchandise. Murakami argues that he is trying to change the way the general public considers amateur artists and establishing a means of converting art fans out of otaku followers and the next generation of consumers. (Murakami 2001b, 147) His company is able to generate interest from consumers by advertising itself as an event that is both commercially viable and fun for, seemingly, anyone and everyone:

There are many different ways to enjoy GEISAI. Buying a piece of art that strikes you, talking to the artists about their work, etc. Or perhaps the piece that you bought (for not that much) will be worth quite a bit someday when that artist is picked up by a major gallery! Its about the kind of excitement. GEISAI is a place of discovery where different people can enjoy art, all in their own ways. (GEISAI website, n.p.)

Through this expansion of the field of contemporary art, successful commercial artists, such as manga and anime creators, can achieve the "higher" status of fine artists, and young artists can realise the possibilities of commercial success through fine art practice. In this way,

GEISAI serves as an example of the degradation and potential annihilation of the high/low divide. Without this distinction, however, the question arises as to whether or not it is beneficial for the art market and the artists within it to downgrade, in the sense that they lose their privileged status as art to the service of consumerism.

Murakami sees himself at the top of the expanding Japanese art scene, and, with GEISAI 2009 and 2010 having taken place in Taiwan, as well as the opening of a Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Taipei in the summer of 2010, he may also be seen to represent the wider Asian art scene. This powerful position, however, is not without its opposition. University students and young artists in Taiwan wore T-shirts saying “I detest Takashi Murakami” (Buchan 2010, n.p.), as young Asian artists want to show the world that their work does not fall under Murakami’s “brand” of art that looks like anime and manga.

Without necessarily detracting from the incredible work he has done to enhance the careers and capabilities of success for the next generation, it can also be stated that Murakami’s self-positioning is part of his strategy to place himself within the art historical canon(s). Within the Japanese contemporary art world, he positions himself as an elder, or, perhaps even a father-figure, to the newly-formed, youthful and confident contemporary art scene in Tokyo. “I am tired,” he says (Pitman 2009, n.p.), as he continuously strives to develop new ways to support and nourish the art scene that he created. He worries about their future after he dies, and like a father, he wants to leave a legacy through which to pass down the fruits of his labour to his successors.

#### **4.3. Signature Style: Murakami and Celebrity**

To be successful as an artist you have to have your work show in a good gallery for the same reason that, say, Dior never sold his originals from a counter at Woolworth's. It's a matter of marketing. (Warhol in Danto 1997, 176)



4.3. Takashi Murakami, Kanye West and Marc Jacobs at the ©MURAKAMI opening gala, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2008  
Photograph © and courtesy of inStyle Magazine

Despite some critics who view his activities as opportunistic and superficial, Murakami's status continues to build. Marc Jacobs prompted discussions both within and outside the art world about the boundaries between art and commerce by contributing a short essay on the artist in *TIME Magazine* when Murakami was elected as one of the "100 Most Influential People" in 2008. With his international reputation and signature style, Murakami is able to relate to pop star Madonna and her influential role in the music industry. One of Murakami's aims is to produce artists, and he looks at the processes in the world of pop music and pop stars. This interest in pop stars can also be traced back to his 1994 "Kase Taishuu Project," as mentioned in the previous chapter. Various aspects from the music industry are considered in the dissemination of Kaikai Kiki artists' work, such as media manipulation, the production of merchandise, and the efforts of a team of assistants and employees.

In the nineties, Madonna had a label, a record label, and she was producing for a big artist - Alanis Morissette. So kind of like that – an artist can produce for another artist. So that is my core idea, and then I



am really interested in producing young artists myself. That's why I have been doing the producing for the artists... It's the same condition maybe like the music industry and the movie industry. It's possible to do it that way. The art itself can open the gate.... for example, like me, production cost is, you know, three millions dollars! That is too much of a big operation and needs the help of many people, so maybe it's very separate to the wave in the future: super independent and super commercial stuff. So, already the music industry has something like that condition... (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

First and foremost, Murakami nonetheless identifies himself as a visual artist and his work as art, and it is already plausible to state that he has secured a significant place in art history. At the same time, he utilises the cultural capital of commercial forms in a fine art context. He celebrates the methods of distribution of cultural products, such as anime and manga in Japan, while criticising the nation's institutional practices of fine art. He locates his artworks in the Western art market, while distributing his "art" in the form of cultural products in Japan. In this way, Murakami is simultaneously utilising and reinforcing, as well as threatening, the low/high distinctions.

Indie bands can enjoy [themselves]... and sometimes a big hit, it's ok... but, at the same time, a commercial artist has to get a big hit with each album, like Madonna stuff, so that is a big pressure. But these artists enjoy this pressure... So that is why this is an impact for the artist's life. It's like a big addiction! I have an addiction, and a really big responsibility for lots of people because of my artworks and my projects. That is a heavy weight. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

Murakami claims that he is "looking for the crossing point between fine art and entertainment" (in Marks 2001, B5), and his native city of Tokyo has a long history of crossover between contemporary art and commercial enterprise. Department stores serve as a common way for consumers to be introduced to fine art:

This back and forth doesn't seem unnatural to us [Japanese]. We have a history of museums with department stores as a venue. It was thanks to the Seibu Museum [within the Seibu department store] that I developed my knowledge of contemporary art. I saw Marcel Duchamp, Malevich and Man Ray in depth for the first time." (Sawaragi quoted in Lubrow 2005)

The Mori Art Museum, in which Murakami's work is highlighted in the entrance to the complex, is a central core of the hypermarket of Tokyo. The museum sits atop a fifty-three-story tower, stays open late into the night, and shares the property with high-end retail stores and movie theaters. The museum attracted fifty thousand visitors in the first week it opened and continues to function as a hugely popular destination in one of Tokyo's largest and heavily commercial districts. The location of the museum supports the Kaikai Kiki message that "art is the supreme incarnation of luxury entertainment." (Kaikai Kiki website, n.p.) The art in the museum, however, is not necessarily privileged aesthetically or conceptually when compared to designer brands and luxury goods sold throughout the Roppongi Hills complex.



4.4. Roppongi Hills Tower, Tokyo

Image © and courtesy of Modi Soondarotok, IDOM Designs (2008)



4.5. Louis Vuitton 5th Avenue Flagship Store, New York  
Image © and courtesy of *View on Fashion Magazine* (2008)

Warhol declared in 1985, “Lock up a department store today, open the door after a hundred years and you will have a Museum of Modern Art.” (in Grunenberg 2002, 9) Perhaps his ‘prediction’ is already pertinent, as it makes apparent the increasing resemblance between places of commerce and places of art. It has become difficult to locate the differences between a department store and a museum, or a designer shop and a gallery. While Warhol’s adoption of images from popular culture may have been a deliberate and Duchamp-inspired turn against the modernist elevation of art above ordinary objects and everyday life, it also had the effect of lending artistic practice to the service of consumerism. Curator Paul Schimmel firmly upholds the place of the museum as a non-commercial cultural institution:

We're not a gallery. I didn't want the Louis Vuitton shop next to our

bookshop. I did not want it to be treated as a commercial enterprise. I wanted it to be like a spaceship that had landed in the middle of the exhibition. I also understood that if we opened a commercial shop and [if it] had direct benefits to the museum, it could [call into] question our not-for-profit status. So Louis Vuitton and Murakami developed, financed and fully operated that shop. We had nothing to do with it. (in Morrison 2009, n.p.)

While careful not to threaten his own position and the reputation of the museum, Schimmel goes on to explain how the new collaboration between art and commerce resulted indirectly in profits for the museum, by stating, “I understood there were great benefits to the museum by changing the paradigm. It was wildly successful beyond my greatest ambition.”

(Morrison 2009, n.p.) Murakami cites Dada in response to the experience of having to constantly defend his mixing of art and commerce to Western critics:

I did a museum store, but this is the US museum industry. It was already done before in the Metropolitan Museum and MOMA – anywhere. So why are people very surprised it came from an artist? That is a trick, right? That is art history. Like George Maciunas has Dada... Fluxus, right? That was a very small market he created, but in history it's a big thing. That is art history. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

Murakami is able to create original art using traditional practices and materials, yet produces an end result that *appears* to be mass-produced. These original works are also displayed alongside actually mass-produced items, which are displayed as (or on equal footing with) fine art. In this way, the idea is original and unprecedented. Dada reintroduced existing items of mass-production as art in the gallery and called them “readymades”, while Pop produced art by using methods of mass-production, such as the silkscreen, as well as using existing images and logos from the media as subject matter. The artists did not actually produce the product itself before reassigning it to a fine art status. The use of the copyright symbol emphasizes and takes ownership of this originality and the new post-capitalist reality in which it is exhibited.

The presence and even the idea of the artist's signature has become something of the past, its historicized value replaced by Murakami's clever copyright symbol and Kaikai Kiki

Company. Superflat re-addresses, though does not completely eliminate, the high/low distinction. The work and discourse surrounding it establishes a network between traditional boundaries, which has the potential to change and re-work and transform them into a multi-dimensional new model. By representing itself as a worldview, Superflat is thereby positioned as an empowered contemporary representation of cultural hybridity for a global audience.

## CONCLUSION

I'm still alive, and when I die, the people in the future will understand what I'm doing now. (Murakami in Lisica 2010, Appendix)

This thesis has drawn attention to the innovative nature and timely relevance of Takashi Murakami's Superflat theory and art practice in an increasingly globalised and consumer-driven art market. This thesis has presented an investigation of key debates in contemporary art regarding the relationship between art and consumption with Murakami as an important example of a transnational artist and a representative of contemporary art from Japan, while successfully navigating the art markets in the U.S. and Europe, as well as Asia. He has been able to collaborate with other producers in the fashion and music industries and maintain the profile of a fine artist by showing in galleries and museums. This range of activities creates an expanded field of artistic production that is both accessible to a range of audiences and controversial within the art establishment and various arenas of academic inquiry.

This thesis is an original approach to research on Superflat from a global perspective, whereby the aspect of merchandising in relation to Murakami's artistic practices is examined. Superflat is viewed as an export and a commodity, and within that process of exportation and re-importation to the original Japanese context, the work becomes a hybrid new form of contemporary art. The reception and popularity of the work in the U.S. has also been discussed in relation to the American (old) Pop art of Andy Warhol and as part of Neo-Pop discourse, such as that of Jeff Koons. In doing so, the thesis presents some commonalities but also highlights the differences between those artists and art forms, while rethinking issues and debates regarding the simplified dichotomies of high and low.

By making use of Western art history, Japanese art history and contemporary popular culture, Murakami presents a complex hybridity that extends beyond previous constructions

of “East meets West.” Superflat art is able to simultaneously reference these histories, while presenting new forms created as a result of this merging. Murakami's activities as an artist, curator and businessman draw attention to the overlapping processes of the commercial product and fine art markets. The languages of Superflat art recognise commercial production and art-making as changeable categories. While Superflat does not signify the complete eradication of binary divisions of high and low, or East and West, as often claimed, it represents an innovative fusion of meaning and identity. At the same time, Superflat both reinforces and complicates the conceptual divisions between art and product in different locations and presentations. This thesis therefore provides a significant and appropriate art historical analysis of Superflat art and theory.

Superflat art reinforces the idea that the definition of art is socially and culturally determined, rather than being assigned as an inherent characteristic of an artwork or the techniques in which a work is produced. Murakami's invocation of the traditions, materials and methods of the Edo period is viewed by scholars as a framework to consider within discourses on cultural identity and contemporary art in Asia:

Their invocation of traditions specifically associated with Edo-period visuality and its libinal economy fuses the material, spiritual, and erotic into a distinct and highly marketable cultural essence that still effectively positions itself as an extreme counterculture critique championing postmodern hybridity... Their immense success in a range of markets and their highly influential writings have certainly framed the reception of Japanese art around the world in the past decade by constructing a critical benchmark for discussions of contemporary identity politics in art. (Weisenfeld 2007, 182)

This thesis also established the way in which Murakami presents the history of Superflat as an alternative to the art establishment in the history of art in the Western canon, as well as in Japanese art history. Superflat does not fit neatly into the Western art canon, nor do the artists define themselves as representatives of a specific Japanese expression, as they take on pluralistic identities by engaging in global and local art markets. By examining the

history of Japan's modernisation of the Meiji period in relation to the Americanisation after the Second World War, as well as establishing the mutual fascination between Japan and the West in the past, with Japonisme as an example, such relationships continue to be a discursive construction. Murakami's idea of national identity in Superflat was, in some ways, created as a response, or resistance, to the cultural exchanges of Japan's Westernisation resulting in a self-Orientalist expression and an exploitation of its potential as a commodity outside of Japan. Still, he seems undecided about whether or not his Superflat theory is a completely original contemporary art form or another manifestation of Japonisme and says, "We seek a new Japonisme – or perhaps an escape from Japonisme." (Murakami 2005, 152) The new Japonisme could be formulated and construed as a subversive self-Orientalism, demonstrated by his strategic cultural engagements, such as the "soy sauce" strategy, and representations and characteristics of Superflat art, such as the use of manga imagery and the historically "authentic" connection to Edo, as discussed in Chapter Two. The statement is also an implication that Orientalism is somehow engrained into Japanese society and therefore Superflat, resulting in a desire to escape.

One of the original aims of this research project was to prove, using Murakami as the example, that the exchange, assimilation, and layering of ideas via cross-cultural exchange result in an exciting, informed, and technologically progressive new generation of unparalleled forms in the art world. While critics argue that the popularity of the works result from a Western cultural invasion, a continuation of colonialism since the late nineteenth century, promoting the disintegration of cultural identity, my research set out to discount the suggestion that globalisation leads toward cultural homogeneity, and that Murakami's work portrays a collision and fusion of two different worlds to generate a new one. This new generation, described by Murakami's *Superflat Theory of Contemporary Art*, introduces a



mutant form of hybrid art, which actually resists the standardization of cultures, yet fuels the establishment of the “hypermarket.”

This thesis addressed the tendency to identify Superflat art as an authentic Japanese cultural product, yet it also represents a new form of transnational art produced in an emerging late capitalist twenty first century context, where art embodies commodity forms, and commodities have cultural value. This is to say that you do not have to be Japanese in order to be “superflat.” Furthermore, viewing Superflat as a strictly Japanese phenomenon is a failure to contextualise the work in the broader socio-historical politics of identity construction and status of art in Japan within the dynamics of contemporary globalisation.

Chapter One discussed the role of the United States as Japan's "big brother" and how this struggle to regain power in Japan has been expressed in Superflat art and its anime and manga sources. Since the 1950s, Japan has made a global impact in various fields, such as architecture and technology, and Murakami is the leading figure in contemporary art. All of these successes contribute to Japan being seen as a cultural power, and the Japanese government is harnessing this new-found glory. In this context, Murakami can be seen as an important historical figure in the future, not unlike Warhol's impact on popular culture that is still infiltrating everyday life and culture in the United States.

Chapter Two drew connections from Japan's historical past of the Meiji period and described the lineage from the “Eccentrics” in relation to the group dynamics of the Superflat trilogy of exhibitions that launched the careers of contemporary Japanese artists, such as Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano. The artists are able to represent and identify with the aesthetics of Superflat through their engagements with popular culture and the international art market. The 1990s era of “Cool Japan” represents a continuation of postwar analyses, while also prefacing emerging twenty first century art practices and technologically integrated systems of dispersion and exposure for the artists of today and tomorrow. These

conditions, ensuing postmodernism, allowed for the relationship between American Pop and Superflat to be examined in Chapter Three. Late twentieth century art movements of Abstract Expressionism and Pop, with particular attention to the important parallels between Warhol and Murakami, inform the development of Superflat art and critical analyses of Murakami's work, career and business methods. The relevance of the crossovers between art, merchandise and entertainment lead into the extended investigation into Murakami's work as a global brand in Chapter Four, which also interrogated its operation in the insitutionalised practices of the Western art market.

The circulation of Superflat work in Japan, the United States and Europe demonstrates the transnational relations between geographical locations, as well as the more culturally specific constructions of art identity and recognition. The analysis of the hierarchies and divisions circulating around the definitions of art and commodity provided an opportunity to highlight Baudrillard's concepts of the hyperreal and Benjamin's concept of the aura in relation to art. Chapter Three further examined Baudrillard's ideas on Pop art in the post-capitalist context of Superflat. These interrogations were then highlighted in Chapter Four with the analysis of Murakami's Louis Vuitton collaboration.

Like other aspects of twentieth century art history, such as Jackson Pollock's "cowboy" identity of the American west, myth-making has become part of Murakami's process of entering the contemporary canon. For example, Murakami has been identified as a celebrity in Japan, however, he is mainly known in art circles and is not always recognized on the street. He is not surrounded by paparazzi unless they are invited guests at an exhibition opening or press preview, and he is not regularly seen in popular culture magazines and television. In fact, the film director, game show host and video game creator, Takeshi Kitano, also known as "Beat Takeshi," has much larger notoriety. His film, *Battle Royale*, gained a large cult following in the West around the same time as Murakami's initial

popularity. Although Murakami has appeared in various facets of the media at one time or another, to say that he is a celebrity in Japan seems to be a myth perpetuated by Western art critics, museum advertising and media. However, Superflat can be understood as an expression of late capitalism, and its strategies contribute to the commercial success of Murakami's work, as well as the exploration of artist identity as celebrity or brand.

The denial of the art world in regards to its own implicit commercialism continues, and it is increasingly difficult to determine whether an artist's motives are cynical or honest, superficial or meaningful. Berger spoke of the desire for publicity within cultures as an inevitable connectivity in capitalist society:

Publicity is the life of this culture - in so far as without publicity capitalism could not survive - and at the same time publicity is its dream. (Berger 1972)

Art is embedded in capitalism, and the buying and selling of artwork has occurred for centuries. For many it appears that the Kantian value system has provided a so-called transcending factor and a conceptual hierarchy of meaning. However, the tendency of art to repress its relationship with production by asserting its conceptual, spiritual or intellectual position in a hierarchy limits its capacity to engage, tamper with and rethink commercial systems and consumer-focused production methods. The practices of contemporary artists like Murakami, Koons and Hirst, which are positioned dually within these systems, are in a situation whereby they have the potential to shift the focuses of art and commercial production. Murakami's sincerity and optimism is emphasised in the following excerpt from the Kaikai Kiki Company Message:

I find living with art to be both intensely personal, and to facilitate communication with others a level of depth unattainable by any other means. That flexibility makes me happy. I believe in the power of art to break down freedom-constricting boundaries, repression and prejudice. Art is a journey where the path is long and the end is something's hard to see. But I am happy to have others join me, standing together and looking forward down the road. (Kaikai Kiki website, n.p.)

In order to distinguish between critique and cynicism one requires a contextually and historically specific analysis. The language of globalisation has superseded that of modernization as a paradigm of progress. However, it has not presented any solutions to the cultural conflicts and problems of the past. One of the identifiable problems, or drawbacks, of globalisation is the potential loss of culture and value through exchange. When applied socially, Superflat theory challenges this notion by suggesting the absorption of cultural elements and modes of expression, rather than replacing tradition with external or new factors. The essence of Superflat is the multiplicity of identity created by this layering, producing changing, rather than disappearing, meanings and forms. The argument that there is inevitably a loss of meaning when forms are adapted, transformed and translated remains pertinent. While an alternative to globalisation is idealistic and therefore likely to be unattainable, artists working within its systems are able to explore, and manipulate, its outcome, rather than opposing it from an outside perspective. The key to escaping the associated socially negative effects of consumer culture and its entanglement of abstracted needs and desires cannot be found in ignoring or refusing production. At the same time, contemporary artists cannot conserve their capacity for critical thought by overlooking its commercial complicity.

In a widely and deeply expanded twenty-first century art world, where the idea of “post-studio art”<sup>34</sup> is already a thing of the past, it is perhaps time to re-think the potentially strategic and critical possibilities of the art studio. As the studio has been rendered obsolete by some artists in previous years, like Baldessari in the 1970s, disembodied virtual realms have taken form as a medium and exhibition space. At the same time, could it be that

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<sup>34</sup> “Post-studio art” appears in the 1970s-80s. John Baldessari taught a course called “Post Studio Art” at CalArts, though he “came across” and thus did not invent the term.  
<http://lacma.wordpress.com/2010/07/06/post-studio-art-remembering-john-baldessari%E2%80%99s-famous-cal-arts-class/>

Murakami and his Kaikai Kiki Company have reinvigorated studio practice and art production in this era of global capitalism?

Like many visual artists, Murakami insists that his art is initially and ultimately a creative outlet, and that there need not be a critical or political reason to “just want to make something.” (in Lisica Appendix 2010) Creating art, according to Murakami, is a “pure” and “primitive” desire, while critics, who, importantly, are not artists, often induce the external expectation that contemporary artists must conceptualise, comment on, or critique an issue. If an artist is commercially successful, this expectation seems to increase, as if the artist must counteract the perceived negative associations with commercialism and superficiality in order to justify their profits. The commercially successful artist, when under scrutiny, is consistently faced with this dilemma. Unless the system to measure an artist’s greatness is somehow extracted from the conditions of the society in which it exists, and out of the realm of cultural products, it is virtually impossible for an artist to make any significant mark on the historical future without commercial success in the present. In the case of Murakami, who displays his ventures in consumer products and fashion items in the same context as his art in galleries and museums, a fundamental issue in most critical discourses on his artwork is capitalism. When I asked Murakami about the subject of capitalism, he was quick to identify and occupy his key role as an artist (as opposed to theorist, curator, businessman or social commentator):

This is our world. But you know, creators cannot create the world. That’s why they have to make artwork. The reason cannot always be understood. For example, if I look at a Manet oil painting... That is, you know, I totally understand each brush stroke. When the artist is standing behind the canvas, there is a very big fear, because this is an adventure world. That very primitive and pure spirit is super important for the artist, and it doesn’t link with the situation in society. The artist just wants to make a painting, just wants to make something... there doesn’t have to be a reason. It’s a very primitive desire, and it happens suddenly. So, basically, the artist doesn’t have to be thinking about anything. (in Lisica Appendix 2010)

The analysis of Superflat art offers a valuable case study in contemporary art production, and Murakami is particularly significant because he demonstrates the post-capitalist impulses of a globalised world. He actively exploits these processes and uses this strategy to establish new forms of art consumption through the GEISAI art fair and his Kaikai Kiki company in locations in different countries. Research indicates that Japanese national identity has been constructed in an essentialist manner, which is complicit to Western Orientalism. This is not to say that those involved in this construct of Japan are unaware of this complicity, and one could say that this is actually a subtle and clever exploitation of Western Orientalism, which aligns Japan with the West as a cultural power. By separating itself from Asia, Japan can be seen to locate itself as a unique geographical zone, while the rest of Asia remain bonded by cultural proximity. (Iwabuchi 2006, 19-20)

Although Murakami's position is sometimes contradictory, it merits the careful study and complex analyses it is now receiving. Murakami has identified himself as an "artist" and his activities as "art," yet he intermixes their presentation. At the same time, they can be reconfigured for display as *either* commercial products (in the museum shop) or fine art (in the gallery). There is evidence that he acknowledges the conflicts of his position and that he adjusts that position accordingly as a marketing strategy for his work and in the articulation of his identity. Therefore, while it is argued that Murakami engages with the hierarchical structures and practices of art and consumer culture, he is also contributing to a reevaluation of aesthetics and culture in the twenty-first century.

Considering the underlying layers of information for the new generation of Japanese artists borne out of a confused (or possibly "lack of") native culture or identity, it is far too simplistic to assume that social, cultural and artistic impact moves only in one direction (from west to east), and this thesis has identified and explored the problems and new questions in the debate about the future of art in this ever-expanding and hyper-driven realm of global

communication. Cultural distinctions still remain, although they are sometimes threatened by the processes of globalisation, they are ever changing. There are more bridges and pathways in between than ever before. Murakami's "soy sauce" flavouring strategy has been successful in creating something that is palatable and popular in both East and West by applying his methods of presentation as a global brand.

We live in an age where binary divisions are arbitrary and authenticity is devalued. Today's emerging artists move seamlessly through multiple roles as artist and designer or curator and businessperson. The new generation does not ponder about what art is, and their work is of "no genre." (Drohojowska-Philp 2001, 79) Though Murakami's work, in some ways, reinforces the divisions between low and high, East and West, and therefore is not an absolute and complete fusion or an erasure of the line between the binaries, his work illustrates that there is something worth studying that happens in the crossover. The world is a long way from realising the threat of global homogeneity (whereby culture no longer exists), and, although Murakami reinforces the existing dichotomies, he has made the debates even more complex and ongoing. Superflat demonstrates an interesting cycle of a process of importation of cultural products, their subsequent transformation, followed by their exportation, or re-importation, into the original context. It is no longer a situation of who is dominating whom in the East-West binary.

Murakami does not completely destroy or erase the distinction of high and low art, because he still relies on institutional modes of gallery consumption for his paintings and sculptures. However, he is revitalising the museum experience and complicating the roles of the institution itself, the artists shown within it, and the curators who exhibit them. Furthermore, although Superflat does not represent the complete disappearance of the line between art and commodity in the sense that Baudrillard has proposed, Superflat is constructing a new model of art consumption. Murakami has taken different components

from different cultural practices and fields, created his own signature motifs and visual components, and by doing so, he has formulated the Murakami brand. With the power of a brand, he raises the profiles of contemporary artists and supports their production and exhibition on a global scale. Therefore, by individualising himself and marketing his own image, he has created these new modes of identity-formation for future generations of artists.

Although still recognising and engaging the boundaries of traditional binary divisions, Superflat tweaks and challenges the conceptual dichotomy between art and commodity by operating at different levels and geographical sites of cultural consumption. The work simultaneously reinforces the distinction of art from commercial production by making reference to the differences in art consumption in Japan versus the West, and privileging the Western art market as the more desirable model for contemporary art in Japan. Murakami's work also highlights the ability to detach from fixed ideas, creating a transformation and alternate identities. This process contributes to the notion that identity formation is fluid and dynamic in a globalised world. His Superflat theory also acknowledges and attempts to overcome the problem of homogeneity ("odourlessness") with hybridity, as an expression of Japaneseness.

Moreover, once established as an original expression from Japan, in order to escape being pigeon-holed as Japanese art of a particular historical moment, "Superflat has to go beyond national boundaries by eliminating its essence of Japaneseness." (Mōri 2006, 188) If Superflat art can, as Mōri suggests, open up the boundaries and remain conceptually sound, it could become a legitimate art historical movement, rather than a "buzz word" used to describe Murakami's work alone or being limited to that of his Kaikai Kiki group. This was Murakami's goal from the beginning:

"Superflat," one form of "Japanese avant-garde" "art," is an "-ism" - like Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and Simulationism before it - only this is one we have created. (Murakami 2000, 25)



It is yet to be seen whether or not Murakami's Superflat concept will continue to grow and expand to form such a movement in future art historical texts, where Murakami could be credited as the inventor and core practitioner, or if, as it is at the time of this thesis, Murakami is known as the artist who came up with a term to describe his work and his brand.

## **Future Research**

No one has yet taken a serious look at the image resulting from the integration of the layers of entertainment and art. But that integration is already occurring. Much integration is still underway. That integration is producing yet another 'superflat' image: us. (Murakami 2000, 9)

Recognising the immanence of the postmodern condition, which obliterates history and difference, Murakami's practice represents the ever-present desire of many for criticality in art. The integration of art and entertainment calls previous and some long-standing definitions of art into question. Is art destined to become yet another form of popular entertainment for the masses? Has it already? Murakami's alignment of the art and music industries may suggest that it has. His approach and its frequent criticisms in the press demonstrate that the division between art and commercial practice has become secondary to the question of criticality in cultural production, and, by illuminating the potential to eliminate this distinction, his practice highlights the contradiction of maintaining the discipline of fine art in the context of late capitalism. Further research can attempt to resolve some of the current debates and contradictions as the future generation of artists take on their inherited positions in the global art world.

While technological progress in the twentieth century had been seen as the ultimate goal of civilisation, it is also seen as its downfall in the twenty-first century. The dualistic manner of interpreting the effects of technological progress on society and visual culture as "good" or "evil" is inadequate, yet the significance of digital culture has yet to be liberated

from this debate. Insight into the proliferation of Japanese popular culture can contribute to redirecting the interpretation of digital culture and furthering critical engagement with digital art and design as production of visual culture.

The emergence of Superflat and its relation to consumption in the context of globalisation and the unprecedented reliance on anime and manga sources as a key element to the work raises new possibilities for modes of production utilised by contemporary artists. Superflat serves as a transnational multi-media model and enterprise that transforms the identity of art and the profile of artists in different platforms and cultural arenas. This model can be adapted and built upon by other artists in other geographical locations and using various modes of production. Murakami's Kaikai Kiki company and his various ventures, such as GEISAI, together serve as a model for future generations of artists to extend the trajectory of art production and expand their practices, functions and capabilities in the worlds of art and popular culture, fashion and media.

The role of GEISAI is that of a platform for previously unrecognized and unrepresented young artists. Artists who exhibit at GEISAI are given invaluable exposure to the international art market, as well as experience and encouragement from Murakami himself and the judges. They are able to make new contacts with dealers, curators, critics, and other artists. Collectors seeking new talent are willing to take a chance on the young artists, as they are backed by the reputation of GEISAI and its team of organisers led by Murakami. Murakami has proved that he has the "midas touch," as well as endurance, quality, marketability and perhaps most importantly, sustainability in an unstable contemporary art market. It is yet to be seen if other events of similar nature can gain as much momentum in other sites. There is still the concern that GEISAI's success is somewhat of a fad at the height of Murakami's career.

It also must be noted that anime and manga-based work appears to constitute a trend that dominates the mainstream of contemporary Japanese art at the moment, but there is a wide range of other modes and stylistic expressions coming from Japan and many opportunities to consider outside the scope of this thesis:

1. To compare the Superflat style to other successful artists in Japan working in the neo-Nihonga style; for example, Akira Yamaguchi, Taro Yamamoto and others.
2. To consider Superflat as modernity and avant-garde in the Japanese art historical context and canon: Attention (in English) to the history of Japanese art, particularly the twentieth century avant-garde, in this way would encourage or suggest a reconsideration of art history in a global context.
3. To include the younger Japanese artists and students who deliberately differentiate and distance themselves from the type of work Murakami promotes outside of Japan: This further research would expand scholarly analyses of Japanese contemporary art to other types of art from those artists not in line with anime and manga industries and determine if these art practices could also successfully create a new model.
4. To extend the analysis of the reception of contemporary art from China, Korea, Taiwan and other parts of Asia in Euro-America and Western art institutions: The expansion of the investigation of cultural identity beyond Japaneseness and into other parts of Asia might also reveal other Asian identities as having a unique place in Euro-American and international art.

Additionally, two theories of media architecture, developed in the 1990s, provide a framework for further analysis of superflatness and "hypersurface" as it relates to architecture and urban environments. (Steinberg 2004a, 130) Through the privileging of surface and the incorporation of moving signs and digital flat screens (e.g. New York's Time Square, Tokyo's Shibuya and London's Piccadilly Circus), the contemporary experience of a city is an

experience closer to animation with "material dimension" (Perrella in Steinberg 2004a, 132) and a kind of digital texture similar to the concept of layering that Murakami applies to Superflat art. Superflat, therefore, serves as a theoretical basis for further sociological and cultural-based studies. The city-scapes of Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano, as well as Aoshima's public installations, facilitate entry into these theoretical analyses from the perspective of both the participation in and visualising the experience of a post-capitalist global society in contemporary art practice.

In this thesis, I have tried to challenge the insufficient notion that cultural identity can be as broadly defined as "Asian" and "Western", or "East" and "West," by examining Murakami as an example of the many ways contemporary artists and their practices both improve upon and complicate these issues. Expanded research identifying and investigating new modes of dissemination employed by contemporary artists can highlight the rise of Asian contemporary art in the 1990s revealing the considerations and contradictions of the approach to art as an exported cultural product. Exported art works from Asia are re-imported into their original cultural context with renewed and added value. The practice and display of such work can be seen to revitalise and complicate the roles of art institutions, the artists shown within them, and the curators who exhibit the work. The issue also raises questions about recognition and survivability in a consumer-driven art market. What cultural factors determine the value of an art object? Are there (what are the) differences in the work of popular Asian artists presented in the West to those in Asia?

Japan occupies an interesting position with cultural elements consciously taken from the West and integrated into Japanese daily life, language and popular culture, while many Asian countries had been dominated by Japanese imperialism in the early part of the twentieth century. Dirlik suggests that Europeans created the idea of Asia, and in this way, they served as "midwives" to the birth of Pan-Asianism. (1999, 181) Additionally, the

rapidly transforming global situation requires new analyses and discourse that, rather than perpetuating old hegemonies and imperialist agendas, recognise and accommodate transnational creators and producers in visual culture as a means to overcoming renewed or repeated Orientalism. (1999, 174) The constantly morphing relationships to the West have contributed what Dirlik calls “continental consciousness,” which, depending on the situation, can be either a handicap or a form of empowerment. (1999, 181) An investigation into the identification, production and exhibition of “Asian art” in this transnational context will expand the understanding of the effects of the layering of culture and identity in art, and how these ongoing discourses stimulate new developments for artists, scholars and curators.

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## Interview: Cindy Lisica in conversation with Takashi Murakami

***Author's note:** The following interview, which took place during the final months of the writing up period of my PhD and after a decade of following Murakami's work, comes as a rewarding finale to years of research activity and various circumstances which allowed the opportunity to be realised. Travel to Japan was supported by a generous award from the CCW Graduate Fund and the Research Department of the University of the Arts London. Assistance with final editing of the transcript was provided by Brad Plumb and Yayoi Shionoiri at Kaikai Kiki, NY.*

*The transcript records a meeting between Takashi Murakami and myself and took place primarily in English (with Kaoru Tsunoda present as translator) at the Kaikai Kiki offices in Hiroo, Tokyo. The location serves as headquarters of the Kaikai Kiki Company in Japan, as well as the first Kaikai Kiki Gallery (opened in 2009), where artist exhibitions and the newly-established "GEISAI University" events and lectures take place. Murakami and his staff had just finished hosting the Spring 2010 GEISAI art fair and were preparing for his major solo exhibition at the Palace of Versailles...*

Friday, 9th April 2010, 4pm – 5pm:

CL: I wanted to ask you about your commercial success and your tremendous impact on the art world, particularly in the West. I am very interested in your idea about producing artists in a similar way that the music industry produces pop stars, and I wanted to know if you think that the contemporary art world can become like such an industry.

TM: We already have a history of producing artists. That came from Andy Warhol. So, like, Edie, Andy Warhol's assistant...

CL: Edie Sedgwick. Yes...

TM: So, like the artist and the pop culture, it's possible for a subculture artist to link, and Warhol himself could produce at that moment. That is in history. And then I got the idea that came from this history.

So, in the nineties, Madonna had a label, a record label, and she was producing for a big artist - Alanis Morissette. So kind of like that – an artist can produce for another artist. So that is my core idea, and then I am really interested in producing young artists myself. That's why I have been doing the producing for the artists.

CL: So it's like Warhol in that he produced the band, The Velvet Underground...

TM: Yea kind of that...

CL: Maybe you could say it's like when you worked with Kanye West?

TM: But this is completely different because Kanye West came from the commercial way. Because he employed me, and he offered me to direct for the music group, the visual part. I did a commitment with the concept. He offered me.

CL: I see, a commission.

TM: Yea.

CL: So, with all of these comparisons with Andy Warhol... What do you think when American art critics say that you're "living in Warhol-land" and they criticize the idea as maybe not being unique, because of Warhol doing essentially the same thing?

TM: Well, it doesn't matter, because I'm still alive, and when I die, the people in the future will understand what I'm doing now. What American people are doing looks like 1960s Warhol stuff, but with over 2000 years of history in Japan and Asia, it's a completely different environment. That's why I don't want to say my background culture is pop culture. That's why I created my Superflat stuff, because we [Japanese] want to believe we've got a democratic society, but this is not true. The Japanese situation had been organized from other countries for over 60 years after World War II. And now we have to be afraid of big countries and their money wars, like China and the US. We already have a humungous debt, and it's impossible to pay back. This is kind of a new slave system. I don't know who created it, or why we agree to this system, but we Japanese people have enjoyed it for a very long time... The Japanese have chosen to borrow lots of money to live a better life, rather than choosing other ways to do so.

CL: Also I wanted to talk about Versailles. Congratulations on having the solo exhibition at Versailles coming up. The previous artist there was Jeff Koons, who you have said is one of your heroes. Do you anticipate some controversy in the press about bringing that kind of contemporary work to a place like the Palace of Versailles?

TM: Maybe for me it won't have controversy, because after Jeff Koons and Xavier [Veilhan]... They already had experience in the palace, so when I make my show, nothing will be a problem.

CL: Yes, they're used to seeing it now.

TM: Just a new sightseeing place, and I will try hard to create for sightseeing - a new innovation, a little bit of a new image to Versailles. Just bringing several sculptures, like 20-25 pieces in the palace.

CL: Will it be new work or the more familiar retrospective...

TM: *(interrupts)* Yes, retrospective, and 2 or 3 pieces, site-specific sculpture and painting.

CL: I see.

TM: But just like this morning, I had a meeting with my gallery, Emmanuel Perrotin, and how we can create a new *something* in the party or the exhibition itself. So maybe we will be adding many new ideas.

CL: I know the animation at Pop Life "Turning Japanese"...

TM: Oh yea!

CL: ...was very well-received.

TM: Really?

CL: Yes, yes.

TM: Maybe we will be making a new film also... for the Versailles original stuff.

CL: I think people are very interested to see more films. Do you have any plans in the future to make a feature length film or animation?

TM: Yes. Everyday I have a process to make this animation. I have three plans, two plans... One plan is live action, so, a feature film, and everyday I'm in discussion with my crew.

CL: Great! Do you see that you get a different response from your work, depending on the geographic location, and do you think about that when you make your work, about where it's going to be received? Do you think there is a very different response to it based on the country, like East and West...

TM: Yea.

CL: ...in the US and Europe?

TM: Yea, Japan and Korea, Japan and mainland China, and Taiwan, Hong Kong... If I present it for Asian countries, each country has a different reaction, so the Western world is very different when compared with Japan. Each country has a different culture, so basically what is accessible with my work depends on their understanding of Japanese comic culture. For example, Spain has had an understanding of Japanese animation culture for a long time. That's why the Spanish people really understand my pieces. But, for example, in Japan, my work is not exotic. That's why they don't like my work, because it is too general, too much manga stuff. Japanese people can see manga everyday, so that's why the reaction is very slow. But, for Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China... it's still a very unique image – the Japanese style with the manga – that's why there's a very fresh and good reaction. People, anytime, want to get to the exotic *something*, so that's why, like me... good reaction with their own country maybe.

CL: I see. Yea, I noticed for the copyright Murakami exhibition, when it was presented in New York, all of the posters in the subway for the show said “monumental exhibition” and “Japanese superstar contemporary artist fusing pop art and culture...” it was really emphasizing your Japaneseness and explaining who you are. But I also found that to be a very different presentation, even just within the US, between the west coast and the east coast...

TM: Mmhmm.

CL: Because in LA, where it opened, all the signs were more subtle. They were everywhere, but they were more simple, just a pink flag with “©MURAKAMI” and maybe Kaikai and Kiki [animation characters], and that's all, not a lot of words, just the dates of the exhibition. Then, in New York, it was completely different, and they picked a different image. They used the large painting of Dob for the image and then all of this text explaining who you are and identifying you as a Japanese superstar, and I thought that was kind of interesting to see the difference in the way they were presenting it, and the focus of the exhibition. In New York, it seemed to be about you as a Japanese artist, almost like a visitor to the US.

I understand that you worked closely with Paul Schimmel on the exhibition, and there was some controversy about the Louis Vuitton boutique in the exhibition, and there is still ongoing controversy about it...

TM: Really?

CL: ...with, I don't know if this is an inappropriate subject to bring up, but there is a lawsuit...

TM: Oh, yes yes...

CL: ...about the canvas prints made from the handbags.

TM: Mm, yes.

CL: Do you think the idea of selling manufactured items as art is unacceptable to an American audience or to a Western audience, based on their ideas about art?

TM: Mmmm... I don't think so, because I couldn't get money very well, compared with Damien [Hirst] and Jeff [Koons].

CL: Oh yea, that's true?

TM: Like, that is... didn't fit yet to the Western art market. My situation is not very straight yet. So if I can pray for that very good feat with the Western art market, that is much more fun. But for me, it's too serious to make pieces and to think about how to change the environment, like I'm doing for Geisai in Japan. It's like incubation for the artists, and it comes from local people, so that doesn't touch with Western culture. That is my main tension for, you know, my life.

But if I can enjoy a relationship in the art market much more, like link with Asian and secondary market... so I really would like to link with that market. But I couldn't! Because the big buyer is the English composition stuff, and also I'm living in Japan, so also I don't have any information. So everyday, information comes from New York to my studio, but my assistant is not *me*.

CL: Right, yea.

TM: Yes it doesn't have uh... But you said "controversial", and I did a museum store, but this is the US museum industry. It was already done before in the Metropolitan Museum and MOMA – anywhere. So why are people very surprised it came from an artist? That is a trick, right? That is art history. Like George Maciunas has Dada... Fluxus, right?



CL: Mmhmm.

TM: That was a very small market he created, but in history it's a big thing. That is art history. So that's why I am acting for, you know, an audience, and the people. Maybe making controversial... looks like crappy! (*Both laugh*)

CL: You mentioned that you're not making as much money as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, but they're also not doing what you are... raising and discovering new artists and doing so much with Geisai and Geisai University, and maybe, I don't know, when you mentioned Damien Hirst... when he went, in 2008, went directly to the auction and sold his works without the dealer, I think maybe that's part of a new landscape, which you're a big part of as well, with Geisai especially, to have the artists get directly involved...

TM: Right.

CL: ...in the market. Do you think that artists in the future will... maybe you opened the doors?

TM: Yea sure! Already. It's the same condition maybe like the music industry and the movie industry. It's possible do it that way. The art itself can open the gate.

Artists can do that, one piece, two pieces, even ten pieces are possible, but, if, for example, like me, production cost is, you know, three million dollars! That is too much of a big operation and needs the help of many people, so maybe it's very separate to the wave in the future: super independent and super commercial stuff. So, already the music industry has something like that condition.

CL: Yea, like indie bands versus pop...

TM: Yea, indie bands. Very easy... enjoy... and making a CD... and free downloads... can do that and enjoy... and sometimes a big hit, it's ok... but, at the same time, a commercial artist, each album has to get a big hit, like Madonna stuff, so that is a big pressure. But these artists enjoy this pressure, so many people follow one message that is very, how can I say, very unusual experience in life. So that is why this is an impact for the artist's life. It's like a big addiction! I have an addiction, and a really big responsibility for lots of people because of my artworks and my projects. That is a heavy weight.

CL: Oh yea, like a burden.

TM: Yea, *but* I enjoy it and it's part of my life. It means a lot to me.

CL: Can you tell me about the model for Geisai? And now you have Geisai University, what is the mission?

TM: Oh, very primitive. When I was living in New York City, in 1992-1994. At that moment, I watched a poetry reading at a bookstore. It was a very small bookstore and the audience looked like over 50 people. Some were closing their eyes, and someone was in tears, while someone was reading a poem. This landscape is very shocking for me.

CL: Really?

TM: Yea because we have no idea of something like that culture. *Very* impressive, but, at the same time, very serious stuff! *Wooh!* So far away from our [Japanese] culture... but basically I'm very impressed and also my studio neighborhood [in New York] had the Knitting Factory. This live house was very small and everyday doing something, like independent musicians and poetry readings. That was a kind of an education for young creators, because if I have a student pass, it was very cheap. If I came into this live house, then I could enjoy it all for maybe 3 or 4 dollars to pay. And I got many, many new information, and very fresh...

But in the bubble economy in Tokyo there were a lot of happenings, something like that, but when I came back to Japan, until now, something like that event is very small. There used to be mobile company creation for talk shows, or some incubation programme, but now there is nothing... so that's why, ok, *someone* has to do that, this is a culture. I have a little bit of money, and that's why, ok I can do that. This is my responsibility, I thought.

CL: So Geisei University is something that was missing... somewhere that is kind of cheap and young people can go...

TM: *(interrupts)* No, not cheap! *(laughs)* See it's very expensive because, you know, one day to pay for it is thirty dollars, super expensive. But for me, this is, if we get thirty dollars each, and fifty people can come, still we couldn't get the money. So have to make many process operations, but this is my maximum. And the audience can agree about the level. If we were doing free stuff, maybe a lot more people could come, but 3000 yen, that's still ok. That means young people really want to participate in something like that event. That is a sign. So, you can enjoy it tonight. It's downstairs. It starts at 7 o'clock.

CL: Oh, it's tonight? Ok, yea that would be great... and how many speakers... Is there a speaker?

TM: Speaker can just speak Japanese. *(laughs)* But you can see some environment, and you can watch, and we have an after party after the conference, if you want to come.

CL: Yea, that would be great.

TM: But in Japan, when I started my career 25 years ago, at that moment, I had a very big stress about Japanese contemporary art. The condition is so slow... and now, still, you know it's the same thing! I try hard everyday, but I don't know why, you know, it's very slow... and many people are very quick to give up trying to create something like that environment. So, that's why, ok, you know, I have to decide myself and I have to do that, if I can do...

CL: Isn't the Geisai event gaining popularity?

TM: Yea, so-so.

CL: You just had one last month. Was it a big attendance?

TM: Uh... so-so. But, for me, last time Geisai kind of reached one of its goals, because each artist was very serious. Some very young people, the young generation of critics, had big questions for me, and that's a very happy condition, because Geisai used to have a much bigger audience, and many artists just weren't so serious. Like, *ok, so I want to get to the prize and if I can pay the 200 dollars, then I can enjoy being an artist...* like the "artist style" or something. Now at last month's Geisai, almost 100% of the artists were very serious, and the pieces were very nice. That is a very great moment for me. But, I have been doing Geisai already for the past 10 years... Yea, like, 10 years is kind of the cycle to get to the, you know, satisfaction, for the creative environment.

CL: And each time do you find artists to bring into Kaikai Kiki for representation?

TM: No, no. I brought just three artists from Geisai: Rei Sato, Mahomi Kunikata, and Akane Koide... So, out of these 3 artists, one has a prize, but the other two artists don't have a prize. We just started with a friendship, like, *Hey, hi, and I love your piece... how much is that? One dollar. Oh, good...* and then, you know, buying some pieces, and you know, making a discussion, kind of keeping a good friendship. Then if our personalities mesh, we can agree and decide that we will produce for their career and represent them.

CL: Do you collect other artists' work as well?

TM: Yea...

CL: Are you a collector?

TM: I can say now I am collector. Yea, like maybe...

CL: Would you consider having a show someday of your own collection?

TM: Yes, uh... I have no desire about that, no. So, just learning, I want to learn from that essence when I buy the pieces. Mostly they're expensive pieces. When I'm buying, I'm very nervous, because there is no reaction when I buy a piece. There is no link with business, I just throw out money... but it is like an understanding of the collector's feeling at that moment. So, thinking... and deciding... and, you know, wondering... Everything in that process... and I learned a lot.

CL: And then living with what you've purchased, or living with the work maybe...

TM: Yea, so that's why my career is still strong. Each time, each piece, I am thinking about how my client will react. 'So, the piece is blah blah blah, and plus one...' it's a very important decision for the collector to want to buy one. So, one cannot be led to that point, it cannot be said in a word or context, it's just like, a feeling. It looks like love, or something like that... falling in love. But then I can be that professional, that jigolo? *(Both laugh.)* So, when I'm making a piece, and my prop is ok, and you fall in love with this piece... *Come come come come... and Bing-o!! Haha!*

CL: Che-ching! *(Both laugh.)*

TM: Yea... something like that... fishing and hunting... I don't know.

CL: There was a show at the Andy Warhol Museum called *Possession Obsession*, and it had pieces from his personal collection, and I was very surprised about what kind of works he collected, because it was not at all, seemingly not at all, like his artwork. Some Baroque pieces and seventeenth century furniture... and then collectible items, like Native American blankets and jewelry and things like that... so I was curious to see if you're a collector, and, would we maybe be surprised by what you would buy? As opposed to people buying your work, how about you, as a buyer - would we be surprised by your taste?

TM: Basically, I love the Time Capsule project at The Andy Warhol Museum. Because, like you, the people in the future... future young people can enjoy going back into the history.

CL: I used to work there actually, in the archives... I got to open some Time Capsules...

TM: Oh really?

CL: Yea, it was great.

TM: Nice!

TM: So maybe my collection is something like that. So, when I die, people will open it and *oof!* Something like that...

CL: Yea!

TM: ...reaction is very nice. So that's why I don't necessarily want to open this box now. Just, you know, buying and collecting, and this is kind of like feeding. I'm very hungry, and I want the essence - like eating... all of these pieces. Sometimes, I shit. *Poo poo...* ha, that is my art piece maybe.

CL: Yea?

TM: That's why I really love to make a shit painting.

CL: And the Kaikai Kiki animation with the poo...

TM: Yea yea, that is, that is uh... I don't know why the Kaikai Kiki animation has a shitting process. Because, number one, children *really* love this moment. Number two, is when I was looking at the Paul McCarthy piece - his obsession is puking and shitting, right?

CL: Mmhmm.

TM: So, I was very in touch with that feeling. My feelings are fed with this thing, and then this secretion. So, maybe I have some reason for this, but I didn't figure it out yet. So, that's why I'm making all this shit in animation. So that when I see the actual animation stuff, my feeling is very happy. *Phew! Heh, ok, nice...* but the reason is - I don't know yet why I love the shit! *(Both laugh.)*

CL: From when you first started making Dob, one of your motifs from way, way back from your early works, and then he kind of changed and you know, started to get more scary and monstrous, and he's vomiting... When that happens to Dob, is that an expression of your feelings at the time when he had that transformation?

TM: Mm... That particular character is very linked with myself. I mean I can say that he is kind of my self-portrait. If we look at Rembrandt's self-portraits when he was young, he has a face of fear and hope. But when Rembrandt painted the moment of aging and getting very old, he is very tired, and still looking for some hope... but this is really sad... so... very complicated. What I mean is that, at the very first moment, Mr. Dob is fresh, but, you know, in the timeline with working with me, each time gets more complicated while getting old. That's why sometimes he's angry... and getting old... and many eyes... many eyes that don't have anything... something like that. It's confusing, my self-portrait! Changing, changing, changing...

CL: I'm actually really interested in your eyes, the multiple eyes motif... Years ago you said about *Jellyfish Eyes* that they "see everything, but understand nothing."

TM: Mmhmm.

CL: I was looking at the Daruma paintings, and I thought about that, and I was wondering if the Daruma paintings, where, you know, he can't see... but you know, maybe he can see everything... or he knows everything, but sees nothing, or something like that. Are the Daruma paintings connected to the multiple eyes motif?

TM: Ooh, that is a nice idea! I want to - I can use it next time. Hahaha, in some interview, thank you! Haha, yes! *(Both laugh.)*

TM: It's true!

CL: Ok! Oh yes, I wanted to ask you about Eleanor Heartney's review in *Art in America*...

TM: Who?

CL: Eleanor Heartney, she is a writer...

TM: Oh I don't know...

CL: ...in *Art in America*, she wrote a review about the *Little Boy* exhibition (at the Japan Society, New York, 2005), and she says that there is no credibility in the old stereotype of Japan as, you know, Zen gardens, a land of geisha... and that kind of stereotype is gone. But then she says, "The show painted a picture of a Japan unwilling to grow up." I wanted to know what you think of this interpretation. Is it like a new stereotype of Japan?

TM: Um, these people are very intellectual people. That's why she can mention about the deeper history. But my audience is uneducated people as well. My audience loves Japanese comics. So, it doesn't have art history, but I want to present to them, not just for the art forum. A general audience and lower educated people can enjoy art history. So, my curated show wants to say, *Welcome, welcome to the different world...* And you can open your eyes and watch my show.

As for her and the critics, it's ok, it's her job to highlight something like that, but these people cannot create the environment. The artist is a kind of activist in society. We have to take action. Anywhere, any material... if we can use something, for example, you know, I can curate my own show, I can produce young artists, I can do design for a fashion brand, I can do, you know, make a movie star... So, one of my jobs, the curated show, maybe wasn't a 100% challenging show, but I did my best, my maximum self. That's why anytime I am reading a bad review, my reaction is, ok ok ok, so I cannot please 100% of the people, and I'm sorry they have a disappointed reaction. Maybe next time I will try harder and have a much better show. But, this time, that was my maximum.

*But...* at the same time, when I die, people will understand: This is a human being. You know, this is a human being... This is a Japanese person and they can do that in another country. Ok, so, you guys, if Americans can move to Japan and curate a show, let's do that! You know, this is a very difficult thing. So... but that's why, this critic is very appreciated, and also, you know, it touches my feelings.

CL: The catalogue for *Little Boy* was quite serious really, with a lot of art historians who wrote for the catalogue...

TM: Yea. Yea, that message is honestly, mainly for my Japanese audience, because Japanese people already forgot about World War II! *Why?*

That's why we have a stupid culture now. So, we lost a war, and that's ok, but we mustn't forget about the process of the war, how we made war, and, you know, like cover up the Japanese invasion of the whole of Asia. And also, the making of the war and all that stuff we did was very stupid, but we have to remember that anytime a war has started – the reason is the economy. And that's why we don't want to forget the reason, and we have to say to all of the world: We have a great experience of making bombs. It's ok... crush society... this is ok too... but one thing is very important is that there was no correction for all of this, and we have to change. For example, the democratic concept is not 100%. It must always change; it looks like an amoeba. That is my concept.

CL: I like that.

TM: So that's why the name *Little Boy* is a very good symbol; it's both the atomic bomb and a child at the same time. Exactly like a child, we have to grow.

CL: Right. You talked about democracy being like an amoeba, and when I think of democracy, I think of capitalism... I read a quote by Sawaragi Noi, and he says that, "causes like interiority, beauty, faith, despair, history and criticism that maintained contemporary art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have now evaporated," like disappeared, and "it's replaced by the thin, flat, shallow reality." He said this in reference to your work. And I think that kind of paints a picture of a sad reality, you know, the harsh reality of capitalism. Is your work a critique of this reality? In other words, is it a critique of capitalism?

TM: Mmm... When I see Japanese animation, mostly the sexuality issue, the Japanese otaku animation... on the surface, it is very silly - just sexy, and very cheap. *But* for the creator, these animation creators have some desire for something. I don't know what exactly, but one must have respect for why these creators want to make these animations, even if the animations are stupid. It's not just for money, so the creator has some reason for their work.

This animation stuff that someone sees as very thin with no meaning is a piece of art. If the piece seems very thin, low quality and has no reason, it still must be respected. It is like a child, a baby, right? That's why everything must be respected, and creativity can be salvaged – a salvation of creative reason. So, for example, Noi Sawaragi's criticism has many tricks. I can agree sometimes, but often I cannot agree with him. Because this is a language. You know, this is our world. But you know, creators cannot create the world. That's why they have to make artwork. The reason cannot always be understood. For example, if I look at a Manet oil painting... That is, you know, I totally understand each brush stroke. When the artist is standing behind the canvas, there is a very big fear, because this is an adventure world. That very primitive and pure spirit is super important for the artist, and it doesn't link with the situation in society. The artist just wants to make a painting, just wants to make something... there doesn't have to be a reason. It's a very primitive desire, and it happens suddenly. So, basically, the artist doesn't have to be thinking about anything. So, like, you know, that's why foolish people make things. *(makes dramatic painting gesture and sound of paint splashing onto canvas)*

Critics are intellectual, and that is a very long distance... My world is very childish, because this world came from an artist. This world is very pure, but, you know, very childish, and very low level. But this is ok, because I'm an artist, I'm a low-level human being. So, haha, I'm not with the highly educated people, but I have an opinion. I have an opinion, and I'm still alive, so that's why I have to make something. So, this distance is very far away.

CL: I find it interesting though that you said that you are low-level, as an artist, and not educated, like a critic, because you have... you've studied for many years!

TM: No no no, this is *completely* true, because, you know for example, punk rock musicians - these people are crazy, right? *But*, these people sometimes have tremendous technique... genius! And you know, passion, right?

CL: Ok, I see what you're saying... yea!



TM: So, for example, football players have lots of cocaine (*simulates snorting cocaine*) and like, everyday they're dancing and drinking alcohol... but running and shooting, and millions of people are like (*simulates fans cheering*)... so that is you know, the job... But, those people are not intellectual! (*laughs*)

CL: Right... (*laughs*)

CL: So, you have secured your place in art history, I think we can say... and you're definitely one of the first Japanese contemporary artists to make a real impact on the West and on the art market as well. So, what is your advice to young artists on how to navigate this international scene?

TM: They need to know themselves... myself included. People in the art world, the young seem stupid and craazy! No future! But, you know, that's why you have to understand yourself. Keep an eye on yourself. (*laughs*) Because I'm foolish, I'm a stupid guy... but that's why I have to try hard to make a painting or drawing... it's like blood. My message sounds very twisted, but you know, I'm Japanese, and for Japanese people, to say something negative, it can sometimes mean something positive. Sometimes British people use this technique for conversation, but it comes out a little bit different. Ok, so artists, when the art people say you have to make a choice and "give up," you have to try hard at your profession... if you choose something. One thing.

CL: So it's not totally hopeless?

TM: No... like, I don't know....

CL: ... because I noticed that you said when you're young you have hope, but maybe later... it's... you don't have it anymore maybe.

TM: No, no, I'm not a hopeless person. That's why I make so many events, right? Now, I'm just, you know, helping the young people a lot, but at the same time, young people understand about the level of their own life. Recently, everyday in discussions with younger people, everybody is making their dreams too big...